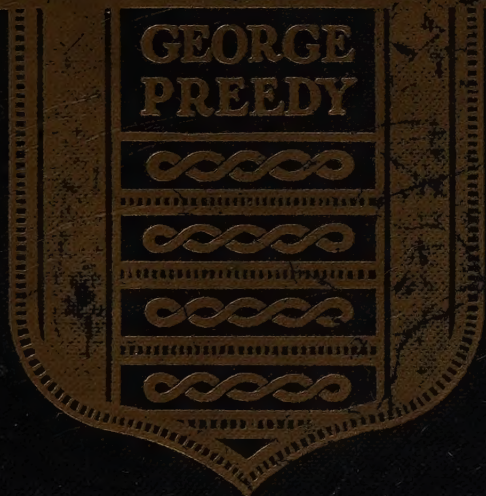
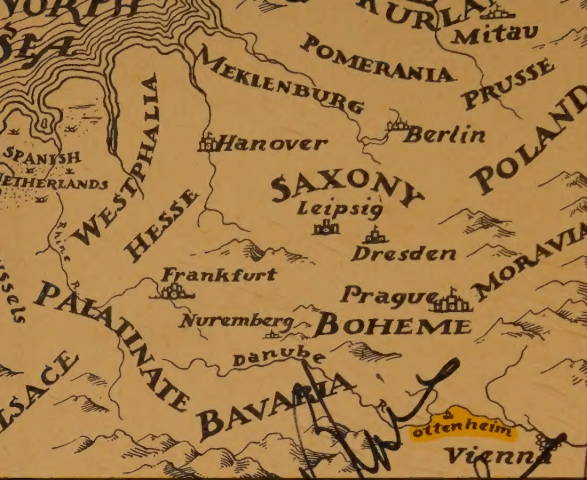




GENERAL CRACK





Schöenbuchel

Village of Dürsheim





Ludolph Hain

GENERAL CRACK

George
Preedy
is a

Pseudonym
of

Mayorie Benson
author of several
historical
novels



GENERAL CRACK

By
GEORGE PREEDY

"Leave me, oh Love, who ledest but to dust."

— SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

*"The Gods must die
Alone immortal lives
The white flower, Fame
Emblem of a glorious life."*

— THE EDDA

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GENERAL CRACK

PROEM

THE guide knew little—or would not speak. He seemed to be a man who had been so long silent that words were difficult. When I asked him about the portraits, he sullenly pointed to the names written in the corner of the ornate frame, where huge acanthus leaves scrolled amidst split fruits and massive grapes.

“But I am a foreigner,” I protested, “and these names mean nothing to me.”

A chilly sun made a faint refulgence in the immense room, falling clearly through the high, deep windows, which looked upon a tranquil and dusky garden, where heroic statues guarded, with a pensive air, parterres which for many a summer had borne no flowers.

The guide pointed to a candelabra in gilded bronze, and reluctantly extolled its merits as the finest piece of work in the vast room. It seemed as if he wished to distract me from these portraits of which he knew nothing. The candelabra was formed of grinning masks, gleaming snakes, and stiff, unearthly blooms, well suited to the rigid metal. I wondered how long since orange scarlet flowers of fire had also bloomed there, from the white stems of scented candles. A long while, no doubt. . . .

“No one comes here but yourself, I suppose, and any traveller to whom you may chance to show the Château?”

“No one,” he replied. “It is impossible to live in a place like this nowadays, and every one has forgotten it, and all that it is about, and every one who lived here. Even the pictures,” he grumbled, “are not very good, and badly require cleaning.”

“One of them,” I said, “appears to be an emperor; but it has no name.”

"The name is there if you look," replied the old man, sullenly, "and it is an emperor; but there were a great many of them in those days, and none of them lasted very long."

The portrait to which I referred was, indeed, blackened, and nothing showed clearly except the long, pale face of the young man, and his blond or powdered hair, tied with a cerulean ribbon. He had those marked features which we associate with the most important Imperial Dynasty, and his eyes were large, blue and appealing. He appeared to be wearing royal robes, and under his slender right hand was a purple cushion, on which rested an opulent diadem, richly embellished with enamel and jewels, but all, now, coated with dirt and dust; in many places cracked beneath the decayed varnish.

The companion picture was that of a girlish woman, very elaborately dressed; but this, also, had been much defaced by time.

"She was too plump," grumbled the guide, looking up at the pictured face, "and very stupid."

But I could discern little of the portrait—only that it was that of a soft, blonde creature, tightly laced into elaborate brocades, and feeding, from a golden chalice, an eagle delicately crowned. The lady, however, regarded neither the gilded eagle nor the gilded chalice, but gazed straight before her with light, mournful eyes. Her tresses were dressed high, and there was a braid of jasmine round her candid brow.

The frame of this picture was enriched by coats of arms, one above the other, mounting to the top, where the Imperial Eagle and the Imperial Diadem rose in a swirl of sumptuous pretension to an apex of gaudy splendour.

"She was related," remarked the surly guide, not without a certain pride, "to nearly all the noble houses of the empire." But he could tell me no more about her than that, and her name was Eleanora, which already, for myself, I had seen written on the frame in scrolling letters.

I lingered before these two pictures, which were set on either side of a ponderous ebony cabinet, enblazoned with

Italian marble of rose, amber and orange hues. The guide told me, with sullen impatience, that there was nothing more to see in the Château, and he rattled the heavy keys, which he was longing to turn behind my back.

"Very few people come to see the Château," he added, reluctantly, "and, after all, why should they?"

The palace, I knew, had long ago been abandoned, and there was little left in it worthy of curiosity.

I was beset by many moods, and would have stayed in the mingling shadow and sunlight of that vast, arrogant and abandoned chamber; but the guide hastened me away.

"All these people are dead and forgotten," he grumbled. "What does it matter about them now?" He pointed out a basalt, lustrous black crucifix, and asked me if I had seen the golden bed of the Emperor in the Prince Palatine's residence at Oud-Buda?

"There, too," he continued, "is the regalia of St. Stephen, and his gilt crozier, and in the garden are silver tortoises and a marble cannon ball; but here we have no such treasures," he added, with sullen mournfulness. "There used to be a collection of medals, antiquities and Grecian coins; but they were sold some time ago. And now," he repeated, glancing at me with hostility, "there is nothing more to see."

But precisely at this moment I had observed yet another picture, which hung close to the opulent entrance door, and, with its back to the window, was in a sombre and gloomy light which rendered it barely distinguishable.

This was an official portrait, on a grand scale, of a gentleman in a dark grey velvet coat, lined with fur, over which was some light armour padded with orange satin.

Round his shoulders was a Polish pelisse lined with leopard skin, fastened by heavy gilt cords; and on his breast were several orders, some of which even I, a foreigner, could recognize, so famous were they: the Eagle of Poland, the Eagle of Prussia, and The Golden Fleece. In a delicate right hand, half hidden by elaborate ruffles of lace, he grasped a baton, sprinkled with *fleurs de lis*; the other hand, resting on the huge silk knot of the dark orange sash at the

hip, was hidden in a military gauntlet, fringed and embroidered.

These details were those of many a grandiloquent and imposing picture of this period.

The man had been a prince and a general. I looked curiously at his face, and thought it the most vital countenance I had ever seen gaze from any canvas. Whether this was due to the skill of the artist or the personality of the sitter, I do not know; but the effect was remarkable—as if some one alive, eager and arrogant, had entered the lofty, deserted room.

The hair was arranged fantastically, after some transient fashion: full curls on the shoulders, and from a buckle behind, pomaded and powdered to a silver hue; but the man's face was dark, almost Oriental in dusky bloom. He was young, and handsome to an almost foppish degree. The short, regular features were composed and smooth, yet expressed an unconquerable energy, inflexible purpose and immutable will. How this was achieved in a face almost masklike in its serenity, I do not know. It seemed to emanate from the mere stare of the black eyes, the mere curl of the full lips, the mere pose of the erect head.

In the sombre, murky background, where there was the usual flaming fort and the usual charge of cavalry, bursting bombs and falling banners in a sulphurous gloom of tempestuous battle, I saw a coat of arms unknown to me, and a ducal coronet.

"Who was he?" I asked—but more of myself than of the guide, already fumbling at the door. A Polish or a Hungarian prince, for there was something Eastern about the man, despite the Western luxury of his elaborate and elegant attire.

"The House of Kurland," muttered the guide, impatiently; "of the House of Ketlar, which has long been extinct; but he had no name; he was an adventurer, a mercenary soldier. But everything about him has been forgotten." And with a sudden leer, the old man asked me if I had seen the vaults in the Church of the Capucine at Vienna—the Im-

perial vaults—"where," he said, "you will find ashes with stupendous titles writ above, and splendid coffins bearing the Imperial Crown and Sceptre, and adorned with scrolls of laurel and palm leaves."

I had seen them, and knew the heavy, classic elegance that adorned these gorgeous coffins in the damp vaults of the Capucine Church at Vienna. Yes, I had seen them—but lingered there a brief moment only, passing no further than the massive bronze door at the entrance to the vaults, glimpsing the immense sarcophagi within, behind railings and gates of iron, each sumptuously housing an Imperial tenant. While they were alive they filled the world with their fame; now they are dead, it is not good to visit them.

I asked the guide why he had reminded me of a charnel house, at this moment and in this place? And I was glad of the pale, insistent sunshine, and the airy freedom behind the lofty windows, though it was but the airy freedom of a ruined park with broken alleys and decayed statues. Then I looked again at the haughty and flourishing portrait, and saw now, beneath the hand that held the baton, a map upon a cushion—a map of Kurland.

"He seems to interest you," grinned the withered guide. "He was nobody."

"I can hardly believe that," I mused. It seemed to me as if the portrait would not allow me to depart, but stared me down, keeping me where I stood.

Yet I left it, in its emblazoned magnificence, and passed the great windows one by one, walking slowly down that long, deserted, sumptuous room. Faint, lustrous clouds were collecting in the translucent heavens; shadows were sailing lightly over the bleached hues of the garden; a watery wind had arisen—it came from the river, which I could not see, but knew to be quite near, beneath the hanging terraces which had once been so lavishly embellished with all the richness of exotic blossoms, and all the grandeur of elaborate trees.

"Who was he?" I asked. "A fop, a dandy, a courtier?"

"A great soldier," said the old man, as he descended the

wide, painted, tattered staircase before me. "He won many victories, and took many towns."

"I should like to know his story," I said.

The old man shook his head.

"There is no story," he replied. "I told you he was nothing and no one knows anything about him."

I knew better: elegant, insolent, brave, superb, with his high pretension to chains, orders and coronet, sumptuously armed and gorgeously bedizened, and by all forgotten!

I feed the man at the entrance to the Château, and prepared to take my departure. His sunken eyes gleamed with satisfaction at seeing the last of me.

I had been a troublesome visitor, who had asked too many questions and overstayed my time; and still I lingered, glancing up at the huge and florid façade, which had something monstrous in its flaunting show of pride.

"What was his name?" I asked. "What did they call him?"

The old man asked, suspiciously:

"Who? Whom do you mean?"

"That portrait," I insisted; "the portrait in the corner."

The old man, hobbling away, rattling his keys, answered, over his shoulder:

"They called him General Crack."

Then he hesitated, and, with a flash of malice, called me back, and said that there was one more object in the Château that I might care to see, and he returned to that mournful desertion of the Château and entered a room on the ground floor which was dark and damp. The guide pulled back tarnished, heavy curtains and pointed to an old stained print hanging on the panelled wall.

A funeral procession, black with lugubrious solemnity, mourning sable robes, weepers, a coach with eight horses whose trappings touched the ground, whose plumes rose, monstrous, above the cortège, a pall bedizened with the arms I had seen in the portrait, and underneath:

The Pompous Obsequies of His Highness Prince Christian Rudolph Augustus Christopher Ketlar, Maréchal de

France, Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, Knight of the Orders of Poland and Saxony.

The guide made no remark, and his sunken eyes seemed to dare me to question him; I left the Château for the last time, looking back at it as one looks back at a place one is never likely to see again. By the scrolled rusty iron gates that enclosed this neglected domain, I saw through the litter of mouldering pine needles beneath a gaunt, black fir, one small bright green leaf.

THE AUTHOR.

December, 1927.

ONE

WHEN he arrived at the gates of the Château, the messenger remarked with scorn on the sumptuous prospect.

"All very well," he muttered, "when one's father has been Paymaster General and Viceroy of Naples—oh, yes, we all know what that means—"

He did not relish his errand and with a rather bitter eye viewed the obvious beauties of the scene.

An avenue of lofty trees stretched before him, trees so lofty that they seemed to shake their airy plumes in the clouds which, rosy and gauzy, softened the August cerulean of the high Heavens.

Beneath these trees the rich thick sward showed an unblemished green, and beyond these trees stood the Château of Ottenheim behind terraces with statues and balustrades and vases of handsome leaved plants, all white in the clear, hot, thin sunlight.

The messenger passed through the gilded iron gates, which stood open and unguarded as if contemptuous of intruders, and rode slowly up the straight entrance road.

Glancing to left or right as he went reluctantly on his way, he saw pleasant vistas and noble *allées* of an imposing park with here and there a glimpse of the smooth outlines of a classic temple or the silver jets of a stately fountain.

"All very well," he repeated. "All very fine, if it were honestly come by—"

Herds of curious striped and spotted deer wandered in the distant azure glades, and exotic, long-tailed birds flew among the foliage, adding to the fantastic air of the prospect; a keeper in a besilvered livery was in charge of these odd ornaments, which were so delicate and seldom lived long in

Europe. The messenger, with a more decided sneer, reflected on the expense of menageries, which should be, of course, luxuries reserved for monarchs.

When he reached the terraces and the winged staircases, he was dazzled by the brightness of the sun reflected from so much white stone. The gleam of the great pompous façade made him blink, the tall and massive statues of heroes and gods in their curled draperies seemed scornful of his mere humanity.

Despite himself he was impressed.

He was also hot and tired, and his horse drooped as soon as the rein was slackened; he whistled and two tall grooms came from one of the long low wings that housed the stables.

The messenger dismounted and asked, drily, for the master of the Château.

He added that he was expected.

One of the grooms directed him to the great door at the top of the terraces, where he would find some one to attend to his business, and led away his horse. The messenger pursed up his face as one who has expected more honour than he finds, and unwillingly mounted the unshaded steps, so grand and shallow between the flourishing stone figures with wreaths, crowns and trophies; when he reached the top he was hot and breathless, for he was oldish and of a stout habit.

Two footmen in glittering liveries were behind the glass doors; their colours, like those of the keepers and the grooms, were blackish green and silver, like a parody of the colours of the House of Austria, and their badge, three collared goats' heads: these footmen admitted the messenger at once, and took his dusty cloak and his stiff hat.

"I am expected?"

"Yes, Monseigneur. Colonel Pons waits for you."

"I do not want to see Colonel Pons, I want to see your master."

"That is impossible, Monseigneur."

"He is not here?"

"You cannot see him, Monseigneur."

Frowning with vexation, the messenger produced a letter from his pocket; it was garnished with dangling seals of black wax that bore imposing eagles.

"Here are my credentials—I wish to hand them to your master."

"Monseigneur, we have our orders. Colonel Pons waits for you."

The messenger had been warned of such a possible reception; there was nothing possible but patience and diplomacy.

To gain an entrance to the Château was some advantage; to satisfy the necessities of his fatigue and hunger would be another gain.

"Very well," he replied haughtily, "I will see Colonel Pons."

The servants at once preceded him down a lofty marble corridor full of light from the many windows opening on the terrace, to a noble *salon* that gave on to the side of the Château. This room was high and grand, gilded and decorated with rich voluptuous pictures and elegant pieces of furniture; the tall window displayed an enchanting prospect of park and fountains; on the tulipwood table by this window a choice collation was spread.

Despite the messenger's ill humour he was cheered by this sight; shown into an anteroom to refresh his appearance and attire he marked the silver ewer, the fine damask towel, the crystal flasks of Hungary and orange water; he murmured "ill gotten gains" and was sure that all this display was to impress him with the wealth and elegance of the Château of Ottenheim and the master of the Château of Ottenheim.

When he returned to the *salon*, Colonel Pons was awaiting him and saluted him in a cordial and respectful manner.

"I am sorry," said this gentleman, "to fob you off with myself—but I act as secretary here and I shall be able to conduct your affair."

The messenger looked as sarcastic as he dare; he did not wish to give things an ill turn by carrying matters with

too high a hand, nor yet to creep too low; he produced again the letter with the lustrous, black, dangling seals adorned by scowling eagles.

Colonel Pons bowed.

"You are Count Michael Hensdorff, no doubt?" he remarked, and the messenger said he was indeed that personage.

They sat down to table, covering by commonplaces a keen scrutiny of each other.

Colonel Pons had a very amusing appearance; he was a trim, dapper little man of about fifty with a stiff military air; his prominent eyes were a violent blue in a full crimson face, his mouth was crescent shaped, his features good; all his clothes seemed a little tight, his wig was well curled and powdered in the front; he had a fine hand. Though his temperament was obviously plethoric, he did not lack good nature and breeding.

Count Hensdorff was about the same age but heavier and taller; his complexion was a yellowish red and his eyes blue, but these were sunk in his head and faded; his nose was large and pendulous, his mouth harsh. He was rather carelessly dressed, but he had a manner of authority and was clearly a nobleman. He despised Colonel Pons as soon as he saw him, but went warily nevertheless; he was an old campaigner and an old intriguer; there was nothing of worldly affairs that he did not know and he had found most of his knowledge sour to his taste.

Colonel Pons played the host with precise courtesy. This was easy, as food and service were excellent; Count Hensdorff calculated the cost of everything from trout and truffles to pineapple and peaches, and ate grossly, satisfying a brisk appetite.

When he looked out of the window before him, on those long stretches of sward, on the fountains falling into the lake, and the aerial distances, so silver azure, he was thinking of the cost of all that—of bringing the water up and rolling the grass—of planting so many trees and trellises.

When the cloth was drawn, Tokay was placed on the table

and Colonel Pons filled the two greenish glasses; Count Hensdorff had been careful how he indulged in the light German wines, but he could not refuse the Imperial vintage.

Colonel Pons had drunk heartily, with the air of a man who can count on himself and his discretion, even after deep potations. He now rose and gave a toast, holding out his glass:

"General Crack."

Count Hensdorff was taken by surprise; the other added:

"General Crack—our host."

Count Hensdorff could not refuse to rise and pledge the name.

"Of course—General Crack." He drank and then laughed, "But—between you and me—"

They resealed themselves.

"Exactly," said Colonel Pons, whose vivid bulging eyes seemed now to blaze in his flushed face, "between you and me." He finished his wine.

"This is all very splendid," smiled the messenger. "I am duly impressed."

"I thought you would be."

"But I know the real value of it—"

"Many million kronen," finished Colonel Pons. "Of course, you've seen nothing yet—"

"I didn't mean that, I mean the real value of all this display—it might go where it came from, you know—into other people's pockets."

"Ha!" said Colonel Pons, taking another glass of Tokay.

"I dare say you get a pretty good salary."

Colonel Pons did not think this worth a reply; he wiped his narrow purple lips with a very delicate handkerchief.

"And he treats you well, no doubt," added Hensdorff, taking out a curved pipe finished with a head of Cæsar Augustus.

"As one soldier to another."

"But will it last?"

"What a ridiculous question," returned the Colonel

blandly. "Will you, or I, or anything last? Flesh is grass, my dear Count."

"Don't put me off with quips, Colonel, for I've very little time to waste. I've to be back in Vienna on Friday, and a damned tedious journey it is, I can tell you; my lackey fell sick on the way and I had to come alone."

"With pious thoughts for company, eh?"

The Colonel had also his pipe, but it was a more elegant affair than that of his guest; pale wreaths of smoke began tentatively to ascend to the gilt ceiling; the two gentlemen relaxed comfortably into the rich satin chairs with the well-rounded backs and stout arms and big bow legs.

"With this thought—to see General Crack himself."

"You won't," Pons assured him. "You'll see no one but myself. You can stay as long as you like, but you won't see General Crack."

"You know from whom I come?"

"Of course—it's because of whom you come from that he won't see you."

"I've orders to see him—positive orders."

Colonel Pons grimaced.

"It's absolutely no use, my dear fellow!"

"He's here, I suppose, in this little paradise of his?"

"Yes."

"Well, can't you tell him—one soldier to another—"

"No, I can't. You've got to transact your business with me."

Hensdorff could not control a flare of temper; saw no great reason why he should control a flare of temper.

"I'm damned if I will."

"Just as you please," replied the Colonel with a slight deepening of the violet in his cheeks. "You know best what they'll say in Vienna when you tell them you wouldn't treat with me."

"They're not so desperate," declared Hensdorff sullenly.

"Oh, they aren't, aren't they?" snapped Colonel Pons. "Oh, aren't they indeed? No, I suppose not—with *you* sitting *here*, oh, of course not!"

Hensdorff writhed.

"Things look black," he admitted.

"I should think they do." Colonel Pons leaned forward in some excitement. "How many are in this, eh? All the old gang, one on top of another—England, France, Spain, Holland? We hear the news here, I can tell you. General Crack is well informed; that conference in Brussels is a farce—any minute it will break up—and the Allies are ready, while you aren't. Lorraine, Hungary and Prussia—all straining at the leash, eh?"

"I've no doubt that General Crack is well informed of all that," sneered Michael Hensdorff. "He'd keep his eye on his market—but if this pot boils over he'll get scalded, like the rest of us."

"What is your offer?" asked Pons. "We may as well come to that."

"I'm not prepared to make one. Don't fly too high. Who, after all, is General Crack?"

Pons was silent; he smoked, like a man at ease.

"You can't bluff me," added Hensdorff, who was bluffing himself by this display of assurance. "His position is precarious, his fortune unstable, and we all know how he got it—his father had a finger in every pocket in the Empire—Viceroy of Naples and Paymaster General!"

"Why rake up all this ancient history? What can it matter how he made his money?"

"Then—his reputation—you can't play fast and loose with every one forever—"

"If you're clever enough," declared Pons, "you can."

"Bah! If you follow your man so blindly he'll lead you into a ditch; you won't be able to scramble out of it—"

"And what about your man?" cried the Colonel with popping eyes. "Isn't he in the ditch already?"

"You mean the Emperor?"

"I suppose you call him the Emperor—"

"Yes, I do, and you'd better be careful; if I was to report this in Vienna—"

"Report it in Hell," cried the Colonel, inflamed. "What do we care about Vienna?"

"I shouldn't flourish too much," sneered Hensdorff. "You're not so secure—"

Colonel Pons interrupted by striking the table with his open hand.

"Words, words!" he cried. "You came here to make an offer for the services of General Crack—make it!"

Hensdorff was not thus to be domineered over; he retorted vigorously:

"I shall not. My offer is for the ears of General Crack alone."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Pons softly.

Hensdorff, though cornered, continued to bluff: "Not at all. I merely follow my instructions. Your General Crack is not so invaluable—to any one—"

"You know," put in Colonel Pons quietly, "that his name is worth twenty-five thousand men—raised and put into the field to-morrow—that he has Pomerania and Kurland by crooking his finger—and that every Power in Europe is making an offer to him."

At this last cunningly devised bait Hensdorff was forced to jump, though he saw the hook.

"No one can offer what the Emperor can offer."

"When he is the Emperor—the Elector of Bavaria, your master, *isn't*—yet."

"Bah!" cried Hensdorff. "With France behind him? General Crack is too wise not to know which way to jump. He likes the winning side."

"He makes the winning side," corrected Pons. "I don't think he's very temptable just now; he's had all the fame and money he wants; he is very well here; he dislikes your master; he is as hard as this"—and Colonel Pons touched the white marble panel in the window place. "A few points against you, Hensdorff."

"If this had been an easy mission I wouldn't have been sent on it," replied the Imperial messenger. "General Crack is for the highest bidder, of course; one expects no more

from a mercenary soldier—a man of no nationality, enriched by plunder and corruption—”

“Hold there,” said Pons. “He thinks a great deal of his honour, he is very nice on all questions of punctilio—you must put these things delicately—”

“But not with you, my dear fellow. We can’t waste time in talking of honour and honesty and that sort of nonsense. Will General Crack take service with the Emperor?”

“Not with your Emperor,” replied the Colonel, and Hensdorff pulled his big under lip nervously. “No tricks with me, Count—just look round you. Plenty of money, eh? Plenty of everything that money can buy, eh?”

“Yes, yes,” cried the other impatiently, “but—”

“But nothing. Your master is wobbling like a cork at sea, his pockets are empty and his head not much better. General Crack doesn’t believe in him; *in fine*, he has nothing to offer.”

Hensdorff pulled out the letter with the Imperial seal and flung it on the table.

“He has, he has, Colonel Pons, and here it is under his own seal—something higher than anything any one else could offer.”

Pons was slightly impressed by this manifest earnestness; he felt, though he did not confess, a prick of faint curiosity.

“General Crack has The Golden Fleece,” he remarked drily.

“So have a lot of rogues,” said Hensdorff, bitterly. “This is more—”

“More?”

“May I not carry it to General Crack himself?”

“Impossible!”

Hensdorff accepted defeat on this point.

“Well, it’s the hand of the Archduchess Maria Luisa.”

“The devil it is!” grinned Pons. “Well, that’s something!”

“The Emperor’s sister—with the title of Archduke,” added Hensdorff stiffly.

The Colonel laughed, recovering from his surprise.

"Eighteen and a blooming young woman," snapped Hensdorff, grimmer and grimmer.

"As plain as a Puritan's smock," commented Pons. "With two left feet by her walk—no use, Count, no use."

And he flicked at the Imperial letter.

"I'd like to hear General Crack's opinion on that point." Hensdorff was stubborn. "Carry it as you will, it's not an offer of every day—an Imperial Princess and an Imperial title."

"Imperial fiddle-dee-dee—why, her picture's been hawked through all the courts of Europe, touched up too. I'm well informed, you observe; the poor girl will never go down without a dowry, and that's what she'll never get. Clap her in a convent, Count, and save yourself trouble."

Hensdorff had expected all this, so contrived to keep his temper.

"My dear Colonel, you have of course learnt all this insolence from your master. I take no notice of it—there is the offer and you have till to-morrow to think it over."

He rose, with an air of finality, putting away the pipe that had long since got chilled.

"You're welcome to wait till to-morrow," replied Pons unmoved, "but it's *no use* spreading birdlime for General Crack—he was in the trenches at twelve—"

"And frightening nurses with cannon from his cradle," sneered Hensdorff.

"Exactly. He knows his way through any intrigue and any battle. He won't have your Archduchess."

"Ask him," said Hensdorff laconically.

"Certainly." Pons gave his gurgling laugh; his staring blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "But I'll tell you this —" He rose also, straightening his tight waistcoat, "General Crack has his eye on another lady—you're too late—"

"He may have his eye on a dozen," replied Hensdorff coldly. "My offer stands."

"But he intends matrimony," said Pons, enjoying the grossness of the other's surprise, "for the lady is one whom he will get no other way—"

"He has at last set his mind on marriage?"

"Yes, at last, I'd never have thought it, but there we are—"

"Who is it?" asked Hensdorff sharply, suspecting something unpleasant.

"Anhalt-Dessau's daughter—Eleanora."

This was worse than Hensdorff had anticipated. He cried out furiously, exclaiming:

"But she is destined for the Emperor himself!"

"Precisely," grinned Colonel Pons, "but General Crack is more likely to get her."

This was really a swinging blow for the Imperial messenger; he did not know whether to treat the statements of Colonel Pons as mere impertinence or to give them serious attention. He bowed stiffly and said he would take a turn in the park, the sun being declined from the heavens and the shade pleasant.

And he placed, with a gesture not without hauteur, a miniature case on the table next the letter, saying that it contained a likeness of the Archduchess Maria Luisa.

TWO

COUNT HENSdorFF, having nothing better to do, wandered over the Château, inspecting with a covert sneer the splendours of this admirable dwelling.

He thought it detestable that a man like General Crack should have been able to inherit and amass so much money, when he, after working so hard in the service of so many princes, should have accumulated nothing but debts, and he envied his host the gift he himself lacked, the gift of knowing the winning side before it won; whereas he, Hensdorff, had wasted his time in trying to bolster up failures.

He was not quite sure that even now—well, what had that hateful Pons said? “Empty pockets and a head little better.” He wavered in his allegiance towards his Emperor and began to wonder if he could not strike a bargain with General Crack; but pride forbade—to any other man he might have offered his services, but not to General Crack.

Gloomily he wondered if he could bring off the bargain he had come to make; Pons had been so rudely discouraging, and that outrageous suggestion about the Princess Eleanora!

A mere feint, no doubt, but the very hint had stung because Hensdorff knew that there had been recently a hitch in the Imperial negotiations with Anhalt-Dessau. Was it possible that the shifty prince was bargaining secretly with General Crack?

Anhalt-Dessau was important, not in himself (a fussy little pedant, thought Hensdorff) but because he represented the Protestant interest in Germany, one so necessary for the Emperor, in his present precarious position, to conciliate, and he had many powerful connections and relations with whom he had contrived to keep on good terms, and his daughter was heiress to many of these childless families; a marriage with her would add many tempting appanages to the Imperial Crown.

Hensdorff cursed the Archduchess Maria Luisa for not being more beautiful; even in the miniature he had left with Pons, with all the help of roses, pearls and gauze, she made no very creditable figure.

Only two portions of the Château were disused; the chapel and the theatre; the first because General Crack, bred a Romanist, and recently under the influence of Jesuits, had now become a Lutheran (though he paid small attention to any faith and occupied the scant time he gave to spiritual affairs with astrologers) and the second because his morals had lately become austere, and the coquettish actresses and elegant dancers that had lately adorned his Château had been packed off to Paris, not without some regrets and many spoils.

Hensdorff put these two facts together; he thought they indicated a serious bid for the hand of a Protestant and modest princess.

Morosely he gazed down into the chapel; he had opened a small door in a corridor and found himself in a box handsomely furnished with red damask and mirrors, and enclosed with windows of greenish glass hung with blue silk curtains; these looked directly down onto the altar and provided a comfortable retreat against the dullest of sermons or the longest of prayers.

The chapel was empty and rather dusty; the Romish appointments had not been removed. Hensdorff peered down onto vacant tasselled chairs, black and livid pictures of martyrdoms, an altar loaded with tarnished silver, the whole lit by rather fine windows filled with pillaged glass of considerable antiquity.

A gloomy spectacle for Count Michael Hensdorff, who, if a lukewarm Romanist, loathed the Lutherans and was prepared any moment to be fiercely zealous for the Pope, if it might mean a chance of doing a mischief to the Protestants.

He was touched on the shoulder, and turned suspiciously to see a young officer in a fantastic Croatian uniform behind him; he knew this youth to be a Captain Banning high in

favour with General Crack, and, despite his Eastern finery, a Swede.

Hensdorff detested foreigners and it seemed to him that he never met any one else.

"This is a very melancholy spot," remarked Captain Banning civilly. "I have been sent to find you and offer you some entertainment, my dear Count—seeing the door open I looked in—"

"Nothing entertains me," replied Hensdorff truthfully. "I'm here on business, which I daresay you know all about—"

"Colonel Pons told me," smiled the Swede. He was a heavy, plain young man, on whom the extravagant uniform sat rather ill, and so fair that his eyebrows were the same colour as his powdered hair. "Would you not care to visit the menagerie, or the fish ponds, or the stables, the music gallery, or the theatre?"

"No," refused Hensdorff bluntly. "I'm too old for toys; and never had much interest in such things."

"Well, after all, what else is there in life?" asked Captain Banning genially. "These toys, as you call them, are but evidences of power, and if you do not care for power you must be either a saint or a fool."

Hensdorff continued to peer down into the deserted chapel.

"I suppose you think General Crack a great man?" he asked.

"You also think him a great man, or you would not be here."

"Not at all," replied Hensdorff drily. "My master thinks him a successful man and therefore deigns to notice him; as for me, I am a mere messenger. I would rather," he added harshly, "be a menial in the Imperial service, than the favourite of a mercenary adventurer."

Captain Banning did not appear offended at this frankness.

"Well, take care it *is* the Imperial service," he said. "If your man falls, he'll be no better than an adventurer himself. Come, this is a dusty, melancholic place; we may em-

ploy the time till supper more profitably. There are eighty horses in the stables, Germans, Ukraines and English—the gardens have been designed by Bibbiena, though we have had them brought up to date—the house, like M \ddot{o} lk, is by Prandauer—”

Hensdorff interrupted:

“I understand that you have been sent to distract and dazzle me, Captain Banning, but pray spare your pains. I am here with an ill will and not to be coaxed into a good humour.”

Captain Banning laughed.

“If you dislike my master so much, how will you tolerate him flourishing in Vienna if he becomes the Emperor’s brother-in-law?”

“God knows,” said Hensdorff.

The Swede regarded him keenly.

“You remember Wallenstein?” he said. “He drove a bargain with an Emperor. A hard bargain. He saved the Empire on his own terms.”

“Yes, yes, what about this musty story?” asked Hensdorff, moving impatiently.

“Well,” added Captain Banning, “when the Emperor had no longer need of him he had him murdered in his camp. As a revenge for that hard bargain.”

Hensdorff’s face was immovable; just a shade too immovable.

“Bah, those were barbarous days,” he remarked.

“I’ve always understood,” said Captain Banning, “that your master and my master hated each other—so if the Emperor, as you call him, offers his sister to General Crack, he must be in great need of his services—”

“Admitted,” snarled Hensdorff.

“—and, one may well suspect, will try not to pay for them,” finished the Swede. “But I can tell you this,” he instantly added, “General Crack is not the man to stir without full payment in advance.”

“This Ch \acute{a} teau is evidence of as much,” sneered Hensdorff.

They left the box in the chapel and Captain Banning took

the Count to see the theatre, which was a charming little structure, wreathed round and round with gilt garlands, masks and ribbons, and looped satin curtains in glittering cascades of tinsel frivolity.

Hensdorff sank yawning into one of the stalls; he did not try to get any information out of Captain Banning, for he knew that however stupid that young man looked, he would not say a word that General Crack did not wish him to say, or do anything that he had not been instructed to do.

The reference to Wallenstein, now, he had been told to make that; it meant that General Crack suspected treachery.

Well, of course—

Hensdorff, bored, yawned in his stall while Banning fidgeted with the blue satin curtain, pulling it back from the empty stage set with a scene by Burnacini and lamenting the delicious *troupe* that enlivened last spring with *opéra bouffe* and *comédie Italienne*—the Leilas, Silvias and Fiorinettas. . . .

One of the dancers, he said, a Mlle. Foulché, was really entrancing—like a snowdrop, as you saw them glittering through the air at Småland, where he had lived in his youth.

“And melting as soon, no doubt,” suggested Hensdorff. “You must miss these diversions, Captain Banning; it seems a very idle life here.”

“Oh, we keep in good practice, and I suppose we shall be soon fighting again; if not on your side, the other,” and the Swede idly caressed a tattered tinsel Pulchinello he had found tossed on the dusty stage.

“Well,” said Hensdorff, “if your master is hoping to make a party for himself by joining the Lutherans and marrying the Anhalt-Dessau girl, he’s deceived, for matters there are settled with the Emperor.”

After having uttered this round lie, Hensdorff yawned again; he felt a sudden sense of futility amounting to mental nausea; the deserted chapel, the empty theatre, had affected him with gloom; he dwelt on all this buying and selling of tarnished commodities with disgust; every one was base and

dealt in base coin, and how stupid the prizes were for which all contended!

He almost resolved to leave the stale game and retire to his estates in Moldavia, but he knew the while that he never would do so; he was caught up in the inconstant whirlpool and must go round and round till he died of weariness.

To be kicking his heels here, waiting the pleasure of General Crack, he with his hundred quarterings and his pure descent! Never had there been such a time when everything was so upside down.

He tried to fix his thoughts on something agreeable: the Emperor had promised him The Golden Fleece if he succeeded in winning over General Crack, and even, if he made a very good bargain, to create him a Count of the Holy Roman Empire.

But even these promised rewards did not afford Hensdorff much pleasure.

The empty theatre oppressed him; that barren stage, the trophies of Scaramuccia, that pale daylight which filtered through the glass cupola, the vacant chairs, and the young man in his ostentatious uniform fooling with a grinning bauble, all these things annoyed Count Hensdorff.

His heavy face, that looked sickly in the gloom, drooped into an expression of sullen mockery.

"We might go into the air," he suggested, "it's heavy here. I'm sorry to keep your master shut up, as I suppose he must be shut up for fear of meeting me—"

"No, he is in bed," replied Captain Banning, leading the way out of the theatre. "He twisted his foot getting out of his coach, and yesterday he was bled twice—on these occasions he lives on barley broth and cider and gets very low."

"I've come at an ill moment, then," sneered Hensdorff, suspecting a trick.

"To-day he is nearly recovered, and no doubt in the best of tempers—but yesterday he was very angry with Pons."

Hensdorff was glad to hear that.

"And he ordered one of the Uhlans to be hanged for

insubordination," added Banning. "But we waited till to-day for the execution in case he changes his mind."

Hensdorff said that he did not care if all the Uhlans were hanged and all the Croats and Heydukes, too; it would be only so many the less rogues to plague the world with. Captain Banning agreed, but reasoned that there were not so many stout fellows, well trained, that one could afford to lose even one.

They came out onto one of the terraces at the back of the Château and looked across a noble rolling champaign, watered by the Danube and bounded by low mountains, now tinged with a tender purple against a translucent sunlit sky of faint green, like sea water in a calm.

Immediately below the terraces was the shell-shaped basin of a fountain, where the water was thrown up like a tossing plume of silver feathers, and fell, in a glittering cascade, over the lip of the basin, like a silver veil.

By this fountain three Nubian pages were chattering, while they sucked sugar sticks so that their blubber lips glistened with melted sweetness; one held a stand on which was a snowy cockatoo that raised continually a sweeping crest of sulphur yellow, as the negroes annoyed it with their quick gabble.

"A lovely prospect," said Captain Banning.

But Hensdorff wanted to know why General Crack did not live in Pomerania, or Kurland, countries which were so devoted to him, and Banning pointed to one of the valleys opposite and said that the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau often stayed there with the Duchess of Schönbuchel.

"I daresay you would now relish your supper," he added, "and then you may early to bed, to shorten your period of waiting. Lieutenant Ferdinand Gabor will be of our company; he always speaks of you with kindness and is well affected to your Emperor."

Hensdorff felt more and more suspicious at all this; Gabor was a Transylvanian, a descendant on the left hand of Prince Bethlen Gabor, very much reduced in circumstances and entirely damaged in character; an able and a

perilous, a cynic and a subtle man. Hensdorff had thought of buying him, but reflected that he was too untrustworthy, too fickle to be worth any money.

"I have got," he thought, "into a fine nest of scoundrels."

Colonel Pons welcomed them at the supper table, which was set in the pleasant evening light by the window where they had dined.

He was sorry that he had not yet been able to see General Crack, he declared, but promised an answer by the morning.

Ferdinand Gabor, who claimed a princely rank but who appeared to prefer the simple title of Lieutenant ("Of what army?" Hensdorff asked himself.) was seated on the left of the Imperial messenger.

He was a thin, swarthy, handsome man, faultlessly dressed, but he had a look of ruin; his eyes were, in an odd way, ashy in hue; his spirits seemed spent. He fawned on Hensdorff, but dully, as if he was too used to fawn mechanically on everybody.

Glibly he wished success to the Count's mission, and suavely he drank the health of the young Archduchess. Colonel Pons, who appeared to dislike him; rather brusquely changed the subject, speaking of a hunting party arranged for the next Tuesday which he hoped Count Hensdorff would honour with his presence.

"Nay," replied that gentleman, "I must take my answer and begone."

"With a picture of General Crack for the Archduchess," smiled Gabor slyly, at which his colleagues laughed derisively, but Hensdorff kept his gloomy countenance.

"It is all very well for you to laugh," he sneered, "but things change very rapidly these times. You are all snug now, but the time may come when you will be glad of a word from me to the Emperor."

"Well, we shan't get it, I know," answered Colonel Pons. "And I, for one, shan't ask for it. I mean to die in my last battle—"

"How," asked Hensdorff, "will you know it is your last

battle? In every encounter you will save yourself for the next till you are too decrepit to stir abroad."

"I hope," remarked Gabor smoothly, licking his lean lips, "that we shall be all fighting on the same side, Count Hensdorff."

The Transylvanian bowed over his wine; Hensdorff looked at him with disgust; it would be revolting if he ever had to league with such creatures. Gabor affected not to see the disdainful glance and enquired after the Emperor, as he made no ado to call him; his health, temper and activities.

"He is well enough," said Hensdorff, "but fretful at times, being so beset."

"General Crack is never fretful," remarked Captain Banning, "but always preserves his composure."

"That is no sign of greatness, as you seem to think," replied Hensdorff, "but a mere affectation intended to impress the meaner sort, 'tis a trick to keep a cold countenance, and requires no other attribute than a hard conscience. The Emperor is a man of feeling, of honour and delicacy, it is to his credit that he is often disturbed."

"Bah!" cried Pons. "It is to his credit, I suppose, that he is a ninny? Come, Count, let us talk sense the little time we are together. I took a peep at your Archduchess; the artist was skilful."

"For my part," declared Gabor, "I always thought Maria Luisa a very charming princess."

But he made the compliment in such a manner that the other two soldiers laughed grossly, and Hensdorff felt a tingle of angry blood in his cheek.

At this dangerous point in the conversation a lackey entered and respectfully told Colonel Pons that General Crack wished to see him immediately.

The Colonel hastily left his unfinished supper and hurried away without apology. Hensdorff sat sullen between Banning and Gabor and occupied himself with his food.

THREE

THE apartments of General Crack were in the left of the Château beyond the theatre, on the ground floor; they were approached by a guardroom with stars of bayonets on the walls and a design of pistols on the ceiling, where four Uhlans sat in full-fed leisure.

Beyond was an antechamber from which opened a laboratory, for General Crack was of a scientific turn, and then another room full of maps, terrestrial and celestial globes, small models of forts and a miniature park of artillery, together with a library of military books from Xenophon to Cartelius.

Here sat Herr Lippmann, the astrologer and alchemist, who looked like an unfrocked priest.

This was exactly what he was; he had been expelled from the Order of Jesuits for some reason so trivial that he never troubled to mention it; he had a great deal of skill in his present profession, and was of an amiable disposition; he had been useful to General Crack in several capacities and considered himself well provided for life with a comfortable position—as far as one ever could consider oneself provided for in these decayed times.

He kept on agreeable terms with the other favourites of his master and had been able, at one time or another, to make himself, in one way or another, useful to most of the inmates of the Château; for he refused no work and his fees were low.

Colonel Pons passed him, with a quick greeting, and hurried, with his strutting way and important air, into the next room.

This was the bedchamber of General Crack, and very luxuriously appointed; the ceiling was painted with a cloud

of goddesses whose charms were by no means obscured by the flowery vapours through which they floated, and the tapestries on the walls represented a series of heroic engagements where the victors were generously rewarded with laurels, rushed from an approving Heaven by amiable angels, and more substantial pleasures obligingly dispensed by earthly charmers with loosened robes and enticing gestures.

These agreeable battle pieces were interspersed with female portraits fancifully bedecked; between the two windows was an alabaster statue of a Saint, that had been preserved even after the reformation in the religion of her master, not because she was that rather fabulous creature, *A Virgin Martyr*, but because she was a very pretty woman with a very shapely figure.

There was a profusion of mirrors scrolled round with gold, chairs with satin covers that gleamed into posies of silk blossoms, curtains with rich fringes, a carpet that was a very summer of roses, and hanging crystal lamps that glittered like constellations on a frosty night.

There was present a doctor, a page, a barber and two very elegant apes, but these were all silent in their several places for the brocade curtains of General Crack's bed remained closed.

Seeing this, Colonel Pons discreetly paused; he knew that his master, like all great men, had his moods and humours and was not afraid to indulge them; if, in public, he cultivated, with great effect, a dark and icy indifference of demeanour, his intimates and dependents were familiar with a more human aspect of his character.

"His Highness," said the doctor with decorum, "prefers to lie in the dark, but he is awake and you may speak to him through the curtains."

"I was sent for," replied Colonel Pons, eyeing the bed with respect. "I hope my presence is still required—"

"It is," conceded the doctor. "Pray be seated; when His Highness desires to do so, he will speak to you."

Colonel Pons rather gingerly took one of the frail looking

chairs, folded his hands on his rotund person, turned his bulging blue eyes towards the bed, and waited.

This bed was in the centre of the room and closely curtained on all four sides with rose cloth of gold; at each corner a panache of azure plumes brushed the rosy bodies of the goddesses on the ceiling; the two bed steps were of polished chestnut wood.

Colonel Pons waited; he was inured to this sort of thing; moods, whims, caprices—"like a girl," he thought viciously, "lying there, sulking, I suppose, because he's sick—"

But whatever his thoughts, he held himself very humbly, for he did not know that General Crack might not be looking at him through a chink in the bed curtains.

The page cuffed the apes, who dared to chatter on their cushions, and the barber crept into the adjoining closet where he began to mix hair lotions in a marble basin; faintly came the sound of the bottles clinking one against the other.

"Is Your Highness awake?" ventured the doctor, fingering a phial of rich thick medicine.

A voice answered from the bed:

"Yes, but I want no more of that concoction, Doctor."

Pons congratulated himself on the correctness of his expression, since it was now obvious that General Crack could see everything in the room.

"It is an excellent and potent physic," remarked the doctor regretfully, "containing fifty rare ingredients—"

"And all of them devilish in taste and action," replied the voice. "I'll have no more plasters, bleedings, doses or pills for a mere wrenched ankle—Pons, what did Hensdorff say?"

"Shall I draw the curtain, sir?" asked the Colonel.

"No, I prefer the dark. I can hear you and you can hear me, and what more is required for a conversation?"

"Nothing, sir," replied Pons; he attributed this whim to vanity; General Crack was suspected of thinking a great deal of his appearance and probably did not wish to be seen when this was at a disadvantage; his accident had not been

severe, but he had been something reduced by potions, bleedings, and close confinement.

His voice, however, sounded amiable enough. It was a most agreeable voice, though rather expressionless, with a French accent.

"Hensdorff," said Colonel Pons, "has come with a very desperate offer from the Elector of Bavaria, whom he calls 'the Emperor,' and requires an immediate answer."

"He shall have it—no offer of his is likely to require thinking over—"

"Well, I don't know. I expect, sir, you'll be a little surprised."

"Shall I, Pons?"

"He offers his sister, the Archduchess—"

"The lame one?"

"Maria Luisa. With the title of Archduke as dowry."

"Nothing else?"

"Your Highness knows they've got nothing else."

Silence from behind the bed curtains.

"Of course, *if* they succeeded, the thing would be very handsome, no doubt. On the steps of the throne—"

The voice interrupted:

"When I'd smashed the Allies they'd find an excuse for backing out—"

"Naturally the marriage would take place before the campaign opened," said Pons. "Hensdorff is as full of tricks as ever; he told Banning one round lie at least. He said the Emperor had settled with Anhalt-Dessau."

"For his daughter?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he has, behind my back. Anhalt-Dessau is *capable de tout*."

"And so, sir, is Hensdorff. I told him you were sure of the lady."

"And that," said the voice with sudden weariness, "was another lie, Pons."

"Not so deep a one as his, I daresay, Monseigneur. Well, that's his offer, neither more nor less. And I was to give

Your Highness the picture of the Archduchess, as they name her, and a letter from her brother."

"I believe I saw her once, Pons, but not thinking of her in this way, did not notice her. Give me her picture—"

"It does more credit to the painter than the sitter, but if you took her it would hardly be for her beauty, so it is less matter."

A hand, half hidden in a lace ruffle tied with a black ribbon, came out between the folds of brocade and took box and letter; it was then withdrawn, and Pons heard the curtains being pulled apart on the far side of the bed.

"They have made the best of a plain woman," remarked General Crack. "A bitter contrast to the others, eh, Pons? It's no—and no—"

He drew the curtains together, letting miniature and letter fall on the bed step while he sank back on his pillows in darkness again.

Colonel Pons, despite his bravado to Hensdorff, was slightly alarmed at this summary rejection of the Imperial offer, because he knew that his master had received nothing so solid from any one else and that the Anhalt-Dessau affair was in a very dubious condition; Pons believed, in fact, that it was really much more likely that the disputed girl would be given to the Emperor than to the mercenary soldier—to General Crack—Captain Fracasse!

"I am to say 'no' to Hensdorff, then, sir?" he asked doubtfully.

"Say 'no,'" repeated the weary voice from the bed. "I will not fight under Hensdorff's Emperor—rather, I will make my own Cæsar."

"That will be a defiance."

"So I mean it. We always disliked each other, more than once he slighted me—at Belgrade, for instance. Neither do I trust weak men."

Pons screwed up his mouth.

"Who are we to fight for, then?" he asked. "It is true that there are two other emperors in the field, but neither so likely as this one. Your Highness never cared for the

Queen of Hungary's husband nor for the King of Spain."

"We can wait. Let every one declare his play; I will reserve mine. It's too early yet to wager on the winning side, Pons."

"Your Highness will not reflect on it till the morning?"

"No."

Pons came round the bed and picked up the rejected miniature and the letter that was unopened.

He admired his master for this arrogant attitude, but it made him rather nervous. Although he followed rocketing fortunes, he was a cautious man; he would have liked to have tormented Hensdorff to the last but in that last he would have accepted his offer, which was, after all, something clear and definite, while everything else was a mass of chaotic intrigue; and though Pons sneered at the Emperor, he was secretly impressed by the man the King of France had recognized as Imperial Cæsar.

On this pause the doctor offered a scrap of his wisdom.

"His Highness is probably fatigued, and now inclined for his physic."

General Crack laughed behind the curtains.

"Give it to the apes, my dear Doctor, their contortions may amuse you. And good night, Pons. Show that fox Hensdorff all civility, and don't leave him alone with Gabor."

"Gabor knows nothing."

"But he might invent something dangerous. Hensdorff must leave early to-morrow. Where is his Emperor?"

"At Vienna—the Hofburg."

"Well, some day I may be at Vienna—the Hofburg. Good night, Pons."

The Colonel bowed to the bed curtains and then to the doctor, and left the room. In the antechamber he lingered by the table of the astrologer, who was neatly working out a table of gibberish.

Pons, having no belief in anything, was always ready to be credulous of everything, and cautiously sinking his voice,

he asked Herr Lippmann if he had recently consulted the stars on behalf of General Crack.

"Regularly," replied the sage, "though His Highness doesn't take the interest that he used to take—a pity."

"You don't find any threatened fall in his fortunes?" whispered Pons, lowering his purple face close to Herr Lippmann's flaccid countenance. "For he seems to me to presume rather beyond prudence—"

The astrologer was not to be betrayed into revealing the verdict of the stars; he gave a vacant look at the diagram before him and remarked:

"A very extraordinary man, not for a moment to be doubted—"

"I'm glad you think so," said Pons. "I admire him greatly, myself; still, these times, and he carries it rather flourishingly—"

"Well," replied Herr Lippmann, "watch me. When I leave this place you'll know I've found a better one—as long as I stay here you may doubt if there is any such thing."

Colonel Pons returned to the *salon*, where he had left his three companions.

The supper was now over, the candles lit, the room full of smoke. Banning was on the green silk sofa, pulling at his pipe; he appeared to be too intoxicated to care to talk, and seemed to be falling asleep. Michael Hensdorff and Gabor were talking earnestly together at the table; the lean Transylvanian was alert and keen, Hensdorff playing with his polished signet ring.

Pons, recalling the command not to leave these two alone together, glanced indignantly at Banning, who smiled fatuously in return. Pons could not think what his master saw in the Swede.

He sat down deliberately between Hensdorff and Gabor, who seemed quite at ease.

"Well, I've got your answer," he remarked.

"Oh, you have?" The Imperial messenger stroked his pendulous nose. "And a disagreeable one, no doubt."

"What I told you to expect. No."

Hensdorff was calm, but his yellow face expressed bitter contempt.

"No compliments?" he asked. "No courtesies? That one bare word?"

"As many compliments and courtesies as you care to invent, but that's the sum of it—"

He put the miniature box and the letter on the table; when he saw that the last was unopened, Hensdorff scowled:

"This is insolence—a base-born—"

Gabor lightly seized his arm.

"My dear Count! That fool on the sophy, who appears so drunk, will report every word—"

"And who are you to warn him of it?" asked Pons heatedly.

"And what do I care if he does?" cried Hensdorff, rising violently. "My one regret is that I cannot tell your master to his face my opinion of him—"

Again Gabor endeavoured to restrain him.

"A question of management, surely a question of management, you heard my little suggestions just now—"

"Be quiet, Gabor!" cried Pons. "Keep out of this. His Highness said that Hensdorff was to be treated with all civility. There's nothing more to be said."

"Oh, no!" sneered Hensdorff. "You'll all have something to say about it, some day, I expect."

Gabor, who paid no attention to Pons, handed the miniature to Hensdorff with a bow.

"Not the least slight is intended to the lady," he smiled. "Pray make that clear—we all hold her in the highest respect, General Crack himself—"

"Be damned to your General Crack—he had another name in Poland—General—"

But Gabor lightly put his lean fingers over the offending mouth of Hensdorff, and Pons touched his sword with an offended air.

"You don't want a fracas, my dear Count, I'm sure,"

said the Transylvanian quickly. "That is such a stupid way of settling matters."

Hensdorff controlled himself and returned the letter and picture to the big flap pocket in which they had travelled from Vienna.

"I'll leave early in the morning," he announced with a reaction to deep weariness. "After all, what does any of it matter? Colonel Pons, if I might have a lackey to show me to my chamber?"

He looked round at the three of them; a man defeated and at bay, but not a man humbled—indeed, they felt him to be their superior.

With ceremony he took his leave, and, by the time he had reached his magnificent bedroom, he had begun to take heart again, for he had turned with approval to the suggestion made by Lieutenant Gabor.

FOUR

HENSDORFF, a man of sedentary habits, fatigued by an uncommon journey and a vexatious day, slept late, so there was no early departure; he breakfasted in his chamber, with luxury and discontent, reflecting on his three companions of last night.

Pons, the Hanoverian, and Banning, the Swede, were useless to him, he knew; for one reason or another they were entirely attached to General Crack; but it was impossible for Gabor to be faithful to any one—he was nervous and jibbing at the effrontery of his master; adroit and subtle as he was, he might be of some service.

The suggestion that he had made last night was by no means a bad one; not something to be acted upon at once, but something that might come in very well later on; it would be worth while making a little present to Gabor to encourage him. Hensdorff had just that small scrap of comfort to take back to his master—that Ferdinand Gabor might be useful.

He thought that he would delay his going in the hope of seeing Gabor, and seeing him alone; Banning, of course, drunk or sober, acted as a spy, but if the Transylvanian had any wits he would surely make an opportunity of seeing him; so Hensdorff left his room and proceeded cautiously through the large empty chambers of the Château. There was no one about save lackeys, but the Imperial messenger knew that it was very likely that he was being watched.

He looked round quickly to see if he could discover Gabor lurking in any of the corridors or cabinets, but was disappointed; at length, however, he saw, across a stately chamber, the figure of a man on the terrace beyond, leaning on the balustrade that overlooked the valley of the

Danube; this figure was very erect and slender, and though Hensdorff could not see the face, he believed that he had found his man.

He advanced across the polished floor, lifted the brocade curtains, and stepped through the tall windows onto the terrace.

The man turned and looked at him.

It was not Gabor.

It was a young man, very elaborately attired, who stared blankly at Hensdorff; a young man who was not only extremely handsome, but who had taken the greatest pains to make himself appear more so. Very finely was he appointed with a multitude of dark ringlets, lightly powdered and buckled with diamonds behind his neck, with cascades of lace on his bosom, with sash and sword belt fringed and tasselled and a coat exquisitely cut to show off his admirable figure.

His features were remarkable for a rare perfection of line and colour; his full curls, that hung in front of his ears, on his breast, were carefully arranged to set off his oval face. His expression was blank; only his eyes, faintly lined beneath, showed a slight insolence. His air was too austere for a fop, but for this he would have seemed no more.

Hensdorff surveyed this man, in his magnificent frippery, with deep contempt; he coldly returned the blank stare with which he was greeted, and inclining his head, sarcastically said:

"Good morning, General Crack."

"I thought," replied the young man drily, "that you had left for Vienna."

"Your Highness," remarked Hensdorff with a wry smile, "is surely better informed of the doings of your guests."

"I am informed only of what interests me," was the cold reply. "You had your answer, I suppose, Count Hensdorff?"

"Certainly," replied the messenger; he folded his arms, leant against the window frame and seemed in no hurry to

be gone; he was wondering if this meeting was accidental, and if it was not, why he had been granted an audience to-day when it had been refused yesterday; he thought of Gabor with gratitude.

Playing for time, he remarked: "I am sorry that my journey has been fruitless."

"Your mission was not a happy one," replied General Crack; he also seemed in no hurry to be gone, but lounged against the balusters and glanced idly towards the Danube.

Hensdorff was not deceived by his impeccable appearance, so imposing and stately; he knew that beneath this impressive interior was the most vulnerable of mortals who bore always at least one cruel wound.

"There's something in this business I can get him on," thought Hensdorff. "He's nibbling at something. Gabor has approached him."

General Crack spoke, with an appearance of cold candour.

"Your terms were not agreeable. You must have seen for yourself that I lack nothing that your master could give me."

"It was considered," said Hensdorff carefully, "that the hand of an Archduchess was not such a usual offer to a—to one not of royal birth."

General Crack perfectly understood the allusion in this altered sentence, but his icy look did not falter; he was, in every way, a man of high courage.

"I was not tempted, Count Hensdorff," he answered in a level voice. "Pons will have told you that I intend an alliance with Anhalt-Dessau."

"So does the Emperor, as Your Highness is aware," smiled Hensdorff. "With deference, I believe he has the better chance."

The young man moved and Hensdorff saw that the wrenched ankle had not been a lying tale, for he limped.

"What you said to Gabor he has repeated to me—as you intended."

Hensdorff bowed; he felt triumphant—the fish was swimming into the net; this interview had not been by chance.

General Crack had waited for him, knowing that he would be searching for Gabor.

"He said that you hinted the Emperor might withdraw his suit in exchange for my services."

"Ah, that tempts, does it?" thought Hensdorff. "Now why, I wonder?"

The young man continued, in the same level voice, with the French accent slightly emphasized.

"I might consider that—if I found it true that the Emperor had the better chance."

"Of course," said Hensdorff suavely. "I spoke without my master's opinion, he has earnest reasons for desiring that match—he also desires your services, and no doubt he could find some other matrimonial alliance—there was talk of the King of England's daughter—"

"No doubt, but England takes the other side, I think. And as for the political advantages of the match, if I entered the Emperor's service, I should bring with me all the Anhalt-Dessau interest."

Hensdorff was silent, puzzled.

"So, by withdrawing," added General Crack coolly, "your master would gain me, and all the advantages he would have had by marrying the Princess Eleanora—besides, he would be free to contract some powerful alliance elsewhere."

This was very smooth and agreeable; Hensdorff did not doubt that he could bring his master round to such terms; but where was the trick, the snare?

The man who made this offer was not one to do anything for the advantage of others. Hensdorff decided on that frankness which is sometimes the most wily diplomacy.

"I do not see the count of Your Highness in this," he remarked.

"My count is the Anhalt-Dessau marriage."

"But that is not comparable to the marriage you have just refused."

"It happens that I prefer it."

Hensdorff knew that he would say no more than this, and was therefore sparing of his own arguments.

"I am, then, to tell the Emperor that if he withdraws from the Anhalt-Dessau match, your services and the services of the Lutherans who will be your relations will be at his disposal?"

"By no means," returned the young man coldly, "for I am not yet convinced that your master's rivalry is worth buying off—I should not take *your* word for that, Monseigneur. If it should prove to be so, that is the price I should offer—"

"But no delay is possible," replied Hensdorff, further soured by this wariness on the part of his opponent. "The Allies may be in Flanders in a few weeks and in the Empire in a few months. You must take your part, sir, at once."

"Anhalt-Dessau is at Dürsheim," said General Crack, glancing across the silvery valley. "I am going there to-morrow. Do you care to wait here till I return, within the week? I shall know then whether I have an offer to make your master or no."

Hensdorff saw that he meant to force Anhalt-Dessau to "yes" or "no" to the offer for his daughter. Rapidly resolving to use all influence to make it "no," Hensdorff replied:

"I will wait, Monseigneur."

"Very well," answered the young man negligently, and saluting the Imperial messenger briefly, he turned into the grand room and walked away, stately and indifferent, halting slightly.

Count Michael Hensdorff was both elated and puzzled. He would regard it as a fine stroke of policy to obtain the services of the famous soldier and not have to sacrifice the Archduchess, and he was sure that the Emperor, with whom it had gone ill enough to have to offer his sister, would be glad to spare his pride at the price of withdrawal from the Anhalt-Dessau market—who, after all, was Eleonora of Anhalt-Dessau?

No great prize, surely; of no value at all if General Crack could bring in the Lutherans.

But where was the spring, the pit?

Why should that ambitious, bold, restless and insatiable young man refuse the Imperial marriage for a union with a little German princess? He could have made a better match than that, again and again, but had always held back in the hope of something more important.

Hensdorff could not understand the mystery; it would be very politic in the Emperor to ally himself with the Lutherans through the Anhalt-Dessau girl, but to a man like General Crack it would not mean very much; he had, since his conversion, already found favour with the Lutherans; he had very little to gain from that marriage, but everything from that with Maria Luisa—why, then, had he rejected the one and was prepared to pay a high price for the other, he who had never sought anything but his own advantage?

Hensdorff was baffled, and he was not often baffled; he usually found that a knowledge of human nature was sufficient to explain most mysteries; a little patience, a little observation, and there would be revealed the mere humanity at the bottom of the most acute problem, the ordinary emotion or instinct or lust of some ordinary man.

And some such simple explanation there must be for this preference for the Anhalt-Dessau marriage, but Hensdorff could not find it. That General Crack was in earnest he did not doubt, for otherwise he would not have made this concession of an interview, rising and adorning himself for the occasion and waiting about terraces to make the meeting appear casual so as to save his pride from suggesting an interview.

And now he, Hensdorff, had to do some waiting about on his own part, hanging round this dull place for the best part of a week with men like Banning and Pons; he felt both flat and irritated, and it was with some relief that he saw Gabor crossing a corridor with his light and rather stealthy step.

"I've seen your master," Hensdorff greeted him. "And so have you—I suppose you made him the suggestion you hinted last night—about the Anhalt-Dessau affair?"

"No need," replied Gabor, flickering his ashy eyes. "Banning repeated the whole conversation—"

"Well, anyhow, he's bitten—he's off to Dürsheim, and if he can't get the girl he's prepared to serve the Emperor, if he can have the field clear."

"I told you that he would," smiled Gabor.

"What's behind it?" whispered Hensdorff; but the Transylvanian merely laughed; he had a gross and evil laugh. Hensdorff disgustedly gave up that point and hurried to another. "If you want this alliance, you must do your best to make Anhalt-Dessau decide in favour of the Emperor, so that your master will have to buy him off."

He looked round, afraid of a spying interruption, but Gabor answered easily:

"That won't be as difficult as you think. I've some news for you—your man is coming to Dürsheim *incognito*."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Hensdorff.

"True. You see, I am better informed than you are—His Imperial Majesty has a strong desire to see the damsel for himself and press his suit in person."

"Don't fool," cried Hensdorff impatiently. "You really know this?"

"I have my information from Vienna. I am General Crack's newsmonger and have many reliable agents."

"With matters as they are, with war breaking, the Empire in confusion, he leaves Vienna for a flimsy, trashy, adventure—but it is like him," added Hensdorff, changing his violent speech to a tone of deep bitterness; "these Jacks in the saddle, these boys in office! Curse his father for dying and leaving him on my hands!"

"But this serves well," Gabor suggested. "Anhalt-Dessau will hardly resist Cæsar in person—and the two will meet on neutral ground and can surely come to a bargain—"

"Are you anxious that they should?" demanded Hensdorff.

"Yes. I would rather follow both together than either separately. I think if they unite we may see a solid empire—"

if they don't, well, ruin, and the foreigners getting all the spoils."

"That is exactly the case," urged Hensdorff. "Men like Banning and Pons can't see it. They think their master can stand alone. He can't. And I don't think the Allies will bid for him."

Gabor, able scoundrel as he was, was not to be drawn when he did not wish to be drawn.

"That is not my province. But you can rely on me to help you in the Anhalt-Dessau business—and I hope the Emperor will remember it when General Crack is advancing at the head of his armies."

"You'll not be left out," sneered Hensdorff. "You never have been, have you? But I have my spies, too, Prince; I'll soon know if you side-step."

Gabor merely smiled; behind him was a coat of arms on a florid shield, carved in the blue-veined marble; three collared goats' heads as crest. Gabor's dry finger traced the name carved on a ribbon round this escutcheon: Christian Rudolph Augustus Christopher Ketlar.

"If you trust me as far as I trust you, we shall get on very well together," he remarked, then bowed and passed on.

Hensdorff did not, of course, trust him at all; but he believed the piece of information Gabor had just given him, because there would have been no sense in the invention of that bit of news.

It was rather humiliating to discover that General Crack had such an excellent service of espionage that he could find out a thing like that; but then, the Emperor was not very skilful—at anything.

When all was in such a critical condition, to abandon alike the cabinet and the field, and go wandering off to Dürsheim like a romantic idiot of a student. . . .

Hensdorff was disgusted; he thought that he, too, would go, under some excuse, to Dürsheim, to keep his eye on the unstable youth he called master and to clinch the bargain between him and General Crack.

He agreed with Gabor; if the Emperor and General Crack did not work together, there was an end of the Empire, if indeed there was not an end already; Leopold might have been elected at Frankfurt and approved by France, but where were his dominions?

Even his native patrimony of Bavaria was overrun; after eight years' war the Allies were everywhere in the ascendant. The late Emperor had clearly died of vexation and being harried from place to place; he had had a brief period of success when he had seduced General Crack from the French to fight for him, but that adventurer had soon deserted the Imperial cause and joined the Queen of Hungary—he, Hensdorff reflected sourly, was the only person who had made anything out of the war; he had been crammed with bribes and spoils, besides inheriting a vast fortune from his father, a prince who had been fortunate enough to be Viceroy of Naples and Paymaster of the Imperial forces.

Yes, it looked very unpleasant for the Empire, Hensdorff thought; but, at the same time, the Allies were exhausted too, Holland had always been reluctant to fight and the war was unpopular in England. If they could hold out a little longer, give them one or two smashing lessons like Habersfeldt—

Hensdorff ventured to dream of Leopold on a secure throne, with himself as first Minister, a solid place where he could exercise power and pick up plunder; surely he had waited long enough!

He dined with Pons and Banning, and asked them both, flatly, why their master was set on the Anhalt-Dessau marriage?

Of course he did not expect the truth from them, even if they knew the truth, which was doubtful, but he often got something useful out of the lies people told and the way they told them.

The bulging blue eyes of Pons expressed vacuity.

"I suppose it secures a large interest," he answered. "There are so many connections, and all powerful—"

"Bah," interrupted Hensdorff, "there's nothing there that will help *him*; the Archduchess is the biggest prize *he* could have hoped for—"

Banning interrupted.

"Have you seen her?"

"Seen her?"

"The Princess Eleanora."

"No." Hensdorff took no interest in the personalities of these poor little pieces in the game he played; they had no wills of their own, no choice in their destinies, why trouble about them? "I ascertained that she was healthy," he added. "What about her?"

"Nothing about her," answered Banning indifferently. "I only wondered if you had seen her."

"Has she any influence over her father?" asked Hensdorff.

"Not in the least, she is terrified of him."

"Then it is no use taking any notice of her," said Hensdorff impatiently, believing that Banning had spoken thus to lead him away from his question; to which, however, he returned:

"I suppose *you* don't know, Captain Banning, why your master is set on this match?"

"Oh, no," said the Swede, with an odd look and smile. "Oh, no!"

FIVE

HERR LIPPMANN sat at his window; it was a clear night, and he was supposed to be observing the stars, which made a magnificent sparkle in the pellucid dark heavens; in his black gown and flat velvet hat, with his large-featured face composed to gravity and his straight grey locks, he looked very imposing and grand, the image of a meditating philosopher. He was, indeed, sufficiently a philosopher to know that nothing could be gained by stargazing and that while on this planet it was wiser to be occupied with this planet's affairs.

So, while he blinked up through his horn glasses at the clustering constellations, with his elbow on sheets of complex diagrams and symbols, a globe before him and a skull behind him on the window shelf, he was wondering what he could do to stimulate General Crack's interest in astrology, which appeared to be waning; also, if he could persuade the General to give him more comfortable quarters, for this corner room, supposed to be very suitable to a sage, was lonely and draughty.

His impressive attitude was due to the fact that he was expecting a visit from Colonel Pons, who had suddenly discovered an interest in the stars, on a broad hint from Herr Lippmann that something very fortunate for himself had been read in the vast chart of the heavens.

Midnight, the astrologer declared, would be the correct time to explain and demonstrate the Colonel's horoscope, which he had been lately casting. He hoped, while thus amusing the soldier, skilfully to extract from him some information about the moods and projects of his master, so that he might trim his conduct accordingly; of late His Highness had ignored him, and seldom had he had a chance of an interview with General Crack.

He was, therefore, considerably, if agreeably, surprised when the door opened to admit, not Colonel Pons, but His Highness himself.

Herr Lippmann hastily rose, and bowed respectfully. General Crack threw himself into the worn leather chair near the window; he was silent, and seeing his lowering glance, the astrologer did not speak either.

The room was dark and lofty, hung with grey serge and fitted with odd gloomy paraphernalia of mummied birds, sills, retorts, a low furnace, and some maps, which appeared to be of the infernal regions; the light came from a dim lamp and from the stars that showed in such a sweep of splendour through the wide-open window.

The young man who had just entered wore his chamber robe over a shirt open at the throat; his hair hung neglected. He bore the signs of much disorder, and appeared absorbed in disturbing thoughts.

Herr Lippmann observed him covertly, and was impressed, as he never failed to be impressed, by his beauty, so complete, so virile and magnificent.

General Crack looked up, supporting his face in his right hand.

"Pons is not coming," he remarked. "I stopped his folly—to indulge in it myself."

"Your Highness has come to consult the stars?" asked the astrologer with deference.

"No. All about me are rogues, but I think you are the wisest rogue," mused the young man.

The astrologer bowed again.

"Lippmann," asked His Highness, and his words rose to his lips in a surge of passion, "who am I?"

"Prince Christian of Kurland," was the ready reply.

"You are well schooled. Who calls me that behind my back? Banning heard another name on Hensdorff's lips—Gabor stopped it, but what's the use? They all think it—I heard it in Poland—"

"Monseigneur," said Herr Lippmann, "you are surely one

of the most fortunate of men. Why dwell on your few displeasures?"

"I could not sleep to-night, and it is not the first night either, this ankle and the physician's brews have had me much reduced—I toss and dream while yet awake. I have been fevered, Lippmann."

The astrologer greatly marvelled at these confidences but resolved to make his profit from them. Well he knew the rankling wound that galled the young man—every one knew it—this famous soldier, this handsome cavalier was base born; he had no name save such as was accorded him by the courtesy or the fear of men. Son of a prince and a strolling wanton—a poor Columbine of the *Comédie* at Naples—there in a sentence was his tragedy; never mentioned to his face, but ever present in the minds of all who dealt with him; ever present in his own mind, too, through all his fame, his power, his success.

His father, after two fruitless marriages, had acknowledged him, had doted on his bravery and beauty, had left him all he could leave him—but not the throne of Kurland. The young man might call himself Ketlar, but the ancient heritage of the Ketlars was not his; Kurland had been annexed by Russia; the family of Ketlar was regarded as extinct.

Prince of the Holy Roman Empire, he had the right to call himself Prince Christian of Kurland, but scornfully refused to use the name half Europe scornfully denied him, and bore the title under which he had made his great renown, General Crack, an anagram of his baptismal names, Christian Rudolph Augustus Christopher Ketlar.

"Your Highness," reflected Herr Lippmann, "has the power to make yourself what you please."

"I have not the power," was the reply, "to make myself born in marriage."

The astrologer wondered that he should speak of this and felt a little afraid; disgrace and dismissal might be the result of being the recipient of the confidences of General Crack, but the moment would not be denied. As the other

continued speaking with obvious if transient sincerity, Herr Lippmann lost the sense of their mutual relationship; he, too, became sincere; it was a young man opening his heart to an old man in the quiet of the night, amid a sleeping household, with the stars seeming very near through that wide-set window.

General Crack had dependents, flatterers, companions, but no friends; he was a born leader of men and his influence was powerful on all who knew him, but his position had made him arrogant in self-defence; his inferiors were jealous of his good fortune and his superiors disdained his pretensions; nor was he, by nature, affable. Therefore, a long loneliness had always surrounded his anguished pride.

Now, weakened by illness and confinement, the need of one to take the place of a friend had brought him secretly to a man he despised.

"You must have seen a great deal in your time, Herr Lippmann," he remarked with a brooding air. "And known many kinds of men."

"That is so—I am seventy years old and have perpetually travelled from place to place. Yes, Monseigneur, I have made some study of mankind."

"And what, in the end, seems most worth while to you?"

"A comfortable place from which to watch the game—which is now over for me."

"You find, then, human antics amusing?"

"Well," replied Herr Lippmann, "surely Your Highness finds them so?"

"People do not much concern me," answered the young man simply. "I admire danger, the perilous attempt, the difficult conquest, Lippmann, and power. All the power in the world would hardly satisfy me."

"You have a great deal," smiled Herr Lippmann. "You are spoiled, Sir, by good fortune."

"I am twenty-eight," was the moody reply, "and have yet no establishment. What I have gotten I have gotten by selling my sword, fighting for other men."

"If you hoist this Leopold to the purple," said Herr Lipp-

man, "he will give you, no doubt, Kurland or another kingdom."

The mention of the Emperor seemed to cast deeper shade over Christian's sombre face.

"He slighted me, Lippmann, deliberately—at Belgrade and in Poland. Of all men, I detest him."

"Pull him down then."

"I doubt if I can. I tell you, though, it was pleasant when he had to come cringing to me with the offer of his sister."

"You should have taken her, Sir, and put yourself above reproach."

"Nothing could do that," replied Christian passionately, "not marriage with an empress—"

"But all your interests point to a union with Leopold," said the astrologer, curiously wondering what was at the bottom of all this.

"You think so? Give me your frank advice."

Seeing no advantage in any trickery, the astrologer complied.

"I think the Allies would never trust you or treat you well; they are gross peoples, hating foreigners. The French are behind Leopold, and you, Sir, are French by education. You have many friends in Paris; they admire you, value you; they and Leopold will give you much honour and advancement."

"I want a throne," said Christian, rising with a restless movement. "What satisfaction is it to me to put crowns on the heads of other men?"

Herr Lippmann smiled, not without compassion; this sounded to him like a child lamenting for a toy; yet children got toys and this young man might get a throne.

Christian leant in the window space and glanced up at the stars glittering above the valley of the Danube.

"Tell me, have you really ever seen anything in the heavens?" he asked.

"Nothing anywhere, yet everything everywhere," replied the sage.

"As well in the stars as in a church, or in a book, or on

the lips of another man," mused Christian. "To see those other worlds so indifferently bright, so far away, gives me more sense of God than a Mass or a sermon—in any tongue, in any creed."

"If I could read your destiny there," asked Herr Lippmann, also looking up into the sparkling sky, "would you care to hear it?"

"No," replied the young man scornfully, "since I must take what comes, Lippmann, and cannot clutch back or push forward any detail that is ordained—"

"But some say we make our own destiny."

"As far as man may, I will make mine," said Christian. "But how far? Tell me that, my wise astrologer."

"I think I could tell you," replied the old man, "not, Monseigneur, from the stars, but from your face, your bearing—some have their fortunes truly written on their brows. Yes, from that, and what I know of your career and character, I could make a guess."

"So," said Christian, "my hangers-on are always judging me, eh? I know," he added scornfully, "how many appraising glances follow me. Well, tell me your guess."

"You will attain almost all you desire."

"Almost, eh?"

"And you will die, by violence, while still young."

Christian glanced quickly over his shoulder at the speaker; in that wan starlight his face looked pallid and hollowed in the cheeks, his brows frowned beneath the disordered hair; the night breeze blew the laces of his shirt open on his breast. Herr Lippmann reflected calmly that a great many people would pay him very well if he made his prediction come instantly true and slipped that useful little knife he always carried into the bare bosom of General Crack.

"It is likely enough," pondered the young man. "Any one could have ventured as much. What do I care when I die, if first I attain my end?"

"But you would like some time in which to enjoy it," smiled the astrologer.

"Enjoy it?"

"Your ambition—your success, Monseigneur. The fruition of all your desires."

"My desires?" whispered Christian softly; he still looked at the old man; "listen to me," he added rapidly, "I shall take you to Dürsheim to-morrow—and there you will play a certain part." He paused; frowned. "Anhalt-Dessau is superstitious—if you can persuade him—"

Herr Lippmann waited, pleased to think that his services were required. He felt quite able to persuade Anhalt-Dessau anything; but Christian did not finish the sentence; he seemed in the deepest trouble and agitation.

"Leopold is coming to Dürsheim," he broke out. "Gabor found that out—I shall have to meet him there—Lippmann, you must frighten Anhalt-Dessau—anything—he must give the girl to me."

"I will use any means," agreed the astrologer readily. "But will you tell me, frankly, Monseigneur, as you have been frank so far, what this marriage means to you?"

Christian rose and began to pace up and down the dismal room, clutching his brocade robe together nervously on his breast.

"If I do not get her," he declared on a quick breath, "I shall destroy myself."

"Ah, that's it, is it?" said the old man softly. "I thought as much. You love her."

"Love? I do not know if that is the word," replied the other fiercely. "I want her. It must come to this with every man—to want some woman beyond reason—beyond sense. If everything else goes, Lippmann, my dearest hopes, I must have her. If Anhalt-Dessau favours Leopold, I'll buy her from him by offering him the empire he'll never get without me—and that's a good price," he added bitterly, "for a little piece like that."

Herr Lippmann thought so too, but it was useless to admonish or argue in such a case; he could remember some such moods of his own, combined of passion and phantasy, though they seemed so long ago and were overlaid with subsequent philosophy; he knew, too, that only the weak

and emasculate dare to sneer at the power of love; so he was silent, curious, but not surprised; unmoved, but faintly sympathetic.

Christian continued to walk up and down; he was raging at what he considered his own weakness; at what, to him, was the irony of his destiny.

"That she should have been so hedged in, so high placed!" he complained fiercely. "Why was she not a wayside wench, whom I might have bought for a couple of ducats, and likely tired of in a night?"

"Ay," agreed the astrologer, "you may tire of her, Monseigneur. I've heard that she is stupid and likely to grow fat."

"It may well be. Until I have her I cannot tell if I shall grow so fond that she becomes a noble passion, or if I shall weary. What do I know of her? She dare not show her mind or her heart; never do I see her alone. They know her value and set it up, and up. Lippmann, how often have I sworn that never would I be so entangled?—and here I am, trapped."

The old man knew that what he said was true. Christian had ever put his ambition first; his amours had never been scandalous, he had never lost himself in low intrigues, or offended a powerful woman by surrendering to the fascinations of a meaner rival. In brief, with unlimited opportunities for folly and licence, the young man had never been shaken from his dignity and his prudence; he had pleasant memories of many women, regrets for none.

"Well, marry her, Sir, and be at ease," advised Herr Lippmann.

"But it is against my advantage," replied Christian gloomily. "I shall gain nothing and may lose much. I fear Anhalt-Dessau will give her to Leopold. He is going awooing himself, Lippmann, and he is personable and ready-tongued—with his diadem and his pedigree!"

"But it is your intention to buy him off?"

"I do not want to. I do not want to fight for him; I detest him."

"Yet you would do so, to get the lady?" asked the astrologer.

"Such is the depth of my infatuation," replied Christian, bitterly. "I hope none know it, but no doubt they do—I am so spied upon, and grossly watched. Lippmann, I know not how this thing got me. I went to Schönbuchel out of spite, hearing she was destined for Leopold, to see her. I saw her, and it was done."

"You should go there at once, Sir, before the Emperor gets the field," suggested the astrologer.

"I would have been there before but for this accident. And you, Lippmann, will get Anhalt-Dessau with the shew-glass or the crystal. He is shallow and superstitious. Tell him what you will, as long as you tell him it is ordained by Heaven that he give his daughter to me."

"I will do my utmost," said the astrologer, but now without much hope of success; he reflected that his visions and predictions, jumping so with his master's desires, would be too glaring an imposition even for a credulous man; and in these wild commands he marked how a deep passion may sow seeds of folly in a powerful mind.

Christian sank into the worn leather chair and watched the stars again. The beamy constellations were paling in a sky vaguely flushed with light; the pure illumination of the dawn penetrated the dark chamber, and Herr Lippmann rose, and gently put out the rank flame of the lamp.

The young man seemed exhausted; his foot ached from his reckless pacing up and down, his hair hung damp on his forehead; his face—pale, dark, clear—was tormented; his full lips quivered, as if he were going to weep over his own weakness.

Looking at him thus, and knowing his immense arrogance, Herr Lippmann felt depressed. How might not the spectator of this moment of self-revelation be punished?

Christian, in the commonplace light of the morning, would surely not care to remember how he had displayed an outraged heart, a tempestuous mind, and all the poor weak-

nesses to which any humble man might own. And Herr Lippmann remembered uncomfortably the Uhlan now under sentence of death.

Christian appeared to have forgotten his presence, and to be drawn into some inner phantasy arising from the fumes and heats of his passion; he leant his brow in his fine hand, and the angry tears gathered in his eyes.

The astrologer rose; it was a dangerous occupation to look on this emotion; he trod warily about the chamber, then paused to gaze into a convex mirror set in one corner in a stone frame.

Here he could see a minute and vivid reflection of the great light square of the window, the remote sky curdling into brightness, the last flicker of the stars into brief invisibility, and set before this cold display of fathomless distance the bowed and troubled figure of the young man in his transient human beauty, his transient human pain.

Herr Lippmann found himself moved, even startled by this little picture. He continued to gaze into the convex mirror as if he could indeed see there what he had often pretended to see—supernatural wonders.

He saw, in this distorted reflection, Christian move and lean from the window, the delicate breeze ruffling his hair; the fading stars, the flushing heavens, a background for his head and bust, which expressed all that mortality could express of grace and strength.

And by his brocade sleeve the skull showed, cracked and yellow.

"He is looking across the valley and the river to Dürsheim," thought the astrologer, "where his girl is abed. And a lovely scene, with the sky like dropping gold and the river like a track of quicksilver—"

Christian moved abruptly from the window.

"What do you look at in your mirror?" he asked sharply.

"Yourself," replied Herr Lippmann.

"Look no more," said the young man. "Get to bed."

His tone had changed to that inflexible coldness to which

Herr Lippmann was too well used. There was not now any trace of tears in his eyes. Summoning all his effrontery, the astrologer said boldly:

"I pray Your Highness not to remember against me this uninvited confidence."

Christian did not at once comprehend him; he was too absorbed in the tumult of his own soul.

"But I," added Herr Lippmann, "need hardly fear you would be less than generous."

He spoke sincerely; his fears vanished as he reflected that never had he known the young man commit a meanness; placed above restraints and petty fears, Christian had never had need to be revengeful.

"You have not offended me," he now said quietly. "It is your *métier* to read men."

"Well, Sir," replied the alchemist, relieved, "it is also my *métier* to keep my mouth shut."

Christian looked at him reflectively, and even slightly smiled.

"I do weary," he said, "at so many being afraid of me. It heightens my pity of myself."

He went, slow and halting, from the room. Herr Lippmann, yawning and a little cold, opened wide cupboards in a search for hoarded food and drink; he was a constant and a coarse feeder.

When he had ransacked out his breakfast the stars had all disappeared; the whole aspect of the valley had altered with the appearance of the sun above the distant hills.

SIX

COUNT MICHAEL HENSdorFF always felt less sour, less forlorn when he had some definite work on hand, especially when the work was inspired by hope, as in the present case it was inspired. He had already fitted the Anhalt-Dessau intrigue into his schemes, taken in all its bearings, and settled his handling of the matter; he foresaw no great difficulties, but the vexatious question was that of time.

An effete congress was sitting at Brussels; when the supine diplomats who were gathered there had finally disagreed, the war, lulled for the moment, would break out again; and Hensdorff did not wish to weary through a winter before opening the campaign; he wanted the Imperialists, before the last peace protocols were torn up, to take the field in Italy and the Spanish Netherlands, and harry the Allies before they had had time to rally and consolidate their immense forces.

To attain this end everything must be sacrificed to gain the services of Prince Christian; and here the procedure was simple enough; Anhalt-Dessau must be persuaded to give his daughter to Leopold, and then Leopold must give her up to the invaluable general in return for his invaluable services.

Count Hensdorff foresaw no trouble with Leopold, who had never been ardent for this match but wished to marry one of his own Faith, and but little with Anhalt-Dessau, if the surrender of his daughter to an adventuring mercenary was sufficiently gilded by honours and titles for himself.

Hensdorff wrote letters to the Prince Palatinate with the object of securing his daughter, Bernardine Charlotte, for the Emperor, and was vexed that he had no means of dis-

patching them; but Lieutenant Gabor was able to help him there, and supply him with a messenger; the Transylvanian, who appeared to be at the head of a very efficient service of espionage, was also able to inform him that the Emperor had proceeded as far as the monastery of Mölk where he intended to pass the next twenty-four hours before proceeding to Dürsheim, where the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau was at present residing with his ancient relative, the Duchess of Schönbuchel, in her château of that name.

Leopold himself had a residence near: the grand Castle of Bosenberg on the dangerous and lordly sweep of the Danube to the south, not far from the little town of Yps. Hensdorff believed that it was to rival Leopold that Christian had purchased and embellished this estate of Ottenheim, whose splendour now certainly eclipsed that of the Imperial château.

Leopold, however, was not going to Bosenberg but to Mölk, and there Hensdorff decided to join him, both to reprimand him for his lightness in undertaking such an adventure at such a moment, and to unfold to him how matters were with regard to General Crack.

Gabor applauded this plan; he seemed eager to help Hensdorff in every way in which he could to bring Christian and Leopold together; in that union he saw ultimate rewards for himself; besides, his restless, cunning nature delighted in a complicated intrigue.

In the early morning, while Christian was wearily returning to his room from the astrologer's tower, Hensdorff and Gabor had met and talked out their plans; the Austrian disclosed as little as possible of his intentions to Gabor, while finding him extremely useful at the moment.

He was careful to say nothing to him that he did not wish repeated to General Crack; Gabor would, of course, tell him that Leopold was at Mölk, and that he, Hensdorff, was going to meet him there, and Christian would be fully aware of the efforts made to obtain Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau in order to sell her back again, while he would use

all his wits to obtain her without paying for her at all; it would be a keen and close struggle. Hensdorff had no doubt of ultimate success; but he wished he knew why Christian was so desirous of the marriage.

Standing by one of the wreathed and curled statues on the colonnade, Hensdorff watched Christian and his suite depart for Schönbuchel.

It was a very imposing display; no king could have set out with greater dignity. Hensdorff smiled sourly to see the valets and grooms in Kurland liveries, dark green and silver, the Uhlans in their laced and braided uniforms beplumed and bespangled, swaggering up and down the winged marble steps or clattering in the forecourt at the bottom. Colonel Pons and Captain Banning strutted and flourished as became the favourite officers of this flashing array. Hensdorff appeared eclipsed in his civilian attire; he had left the army some time since; none of the soldiers took any notice of him, even Gabor appeared absorbed in the spectacle of the moment.

The Austrian was forced to admit that everything was very well done; the horses were splendid, and handsomely appointed; the uniforms new and fine, most of them of Polish fashion. There were three troops, Uhlans, Croatians and Black Cuirassiers, attended by Heyducks oriental servants; a certain number of each were mustered to escort their General.

"I daresay," thought Hensdorff, "that all this bravery will be very pleasing to the young lady, but I doubt if her careful relatives will care to house so many rufflers."

When all was in exact order, General Crack appeared at the door by which Hensdorff had entered two days before, booted and wearing the ornate uniform of the Uhlans; he looked at Hensdorff in his usual dry, impassive way, and remarked that the day promised great heat, while he pulled on fringed gloves with a silver star on the back. Hensdorff returned his insolent stare and inwardly observed that he was pale, for all his careful pose of invulnerability.

The Austrian admitted, however, that he appeared very magnificent; Leopold, though well drilled to make a fine show, could not rival this sumptuous appearance.

General Crack just touched his hat and passed on slowly down the steps.

"He may thank his God and his tailor for doing very well by him," thought the Austrian cynically; but despite this reflection he was awed.

There was something grand about that handsome figure, something implacable and pitiless and arrogant, but something heroic too, even something awful, as if he was already gloomed by the faint foreshadowing of a terrible destiny; that slight halt gave that effect, perhaps; he was not yet walking with great sureness.

"Nonsense," thought Hensdorff, and brushed aside the impression.

When General Crack had mounted his great bay horse with the stiff braided saddle cloth, there was a slight delay; Colonel Pons had reminded him that it was the hour for the execution of the Uhlan he had condemned to death, and ventured to ask a respite.

"I cannot alter it," replied Christian. "It is better that one man lose his life than discredit come on all of you. How can I keep discipline if there be no punishment for licence?"

The man had abducted, from a neighbouring village, a girl who had persistently refused him her favours, and the parents had come clamouring to Ottenheim for redress.

"Well," said Colonel Pons, regretfully, "he is a very useful fellow, for whom I had some liking. And the girl speaks for him."

"The girl speaks for him?" repeated Christian curiously, holding in the impetuous horse.

"She has been complaining past reason, and swears that if he is to hang she will split her heart—"

"How do you account for that?" asked Christian, with animation.

"It is past my province," grumbled Pons. "But it seems that if the fellow is likely enough the wooing can't be too rough—"

"It is past my province, too, I think," smiled Christian, who seemed suddenly in a good humour. "Let the man go and make it up with his sweetheart."

Hensdorff inquisitively watched this episode to which he had not the clue; he looked indifferently down at the cavalcade, with tossing plumes, rigid cockades, gilded ribbons and flashing steel, and watched them wheel round in the forecourt and canter off down the long avenue of high trees, the sun gleaming in the shining flanks of the horses, in the metallic shoulder knots, in the basket hilts of the long swords, and in the clasps of the agraffes of feathers in the laced hats.

At a discreet distance, Herr Lippmann followed on a mule, with his assistant trudging behind; his civilian aspect would have spoilt the military splendour of General Crack's gorgeous escort, and he had been warned by Pons to keep well behind.

Hensdorff greeted him ironically.

"You, too, for Dürsheim?" he asked, leaning over the low white balustrade.

"I follow my fortune," replied the alchemist, who was an adept at noncommittal phrases; he paused, considering what Hensdorff would give to know the secret that Christian had confided to him last night; he was a thrifty man who looked ahead to the days when he should be too old to play for the favour of princes.

Hensdorff saw his hesitation and came down the steps; the alchemist sent on his assistant to trudge ahead.

"Have you guessed why there is all this to-do?" he asked cautiously.

"Why he is set on the marriage? No."

"Well, I can tell you. And expect a reward later. My news can't harm him, and may be useful to you."

"I'm curious," said the Austrian, "for it is against his interest, which is all I ever heard he considered."

"He knows that," whispered Herr Lippmann slyly. "But he's in love. He wants the girl."

At this Hensdorff could not refrain from laughter; the explanation was so simple and yet the last explanation that he had thought of; had he not always said that behind every mystery was some ordinary human passion?

So General Crack, with his invincible air, was most vulnerable after all. Hensdorff was indeed amused.

"Interesting to see her," he remarked. "I should not have thought him easily pleased."

"He isn't," smiled the alchemist, "but he may be easily deluded by a fit of fantastic passion."

And he touched up his mule and hurried down the long avenue from which the brilliant cavalcade had just disappeared.

Hensdorff at once felt sure of General Crack, and began to cast up the terms he would force on him before he relinquished the desired lady.

Stimulated by these reflections he set off at once for Mölk, which was not far distant on the road to Vienna; by mid-day he saw the majestic domes and spires and open colonnade of the monastery rising imposingly from the right bank of the Danube.

Mölk rose on a jutting dark porphyry rock round which were clustering mean and squalid huts and the mouldering walls of some ancient castle that had once dominated this magnificent position.

The Benedictine monastery was a new building in the Grecian style or Eastern style, by Prandauer, the fashionable architect, on the site of an old Gothic building, opulently adorned with gilding, frescoes and statues, and rising bold and massive into the bright summer sky and higher than the distant hills that edged the windings of the Danube.

The cupola-crowned church, the commanding sweep of the walls, set off with the dark woods beyond the rock on which they were built, gave the edifice an air of towering grandeur, impressive to the casual traveller.

But Hensdorff was not moved by the rich beauty of the

scene, the noble, winding river crowned with islets, the violet hills melting into the horizon, or the ostentatious monastery; he blamed the steepness of the ascent and the exhausting heat of the day as he laboriously rode up the rough road to the gates of Mölk.

To crown this vexatious travelling he had some altercation with the porter at the splendid gates who was disposed to deny that the Abbot or Brothers entertained any guests.

But Count Hensdorff persisted in his demands for admittance; he asked for Captain Leopold, for he knew that this name, his own and that of the titular saint of Austria, was the name under which his master usually travelled.

He was, however, considerably fatigued before he obtained an entrance and persuaded the Benedictine who was called to attend to him that his errand was of importance; he was finally conducted, courteously enough, to the Königssaal, which was one of the splendours of the newly finished building, and hence to the blue and gold library.

This harmonious apartment, a hundred feet long, of dovetailed walnut wood and profusely gilt, well furnished with expensive books and overlooking the majestic sweep of the Danube at the base of the rock below and the superb woods beyond, was in every way imposing, and Hensdorff, as he drank the coffee thoughtfully provided, reflected that, considering the pinch of the times, the ruin of a confused war, and the general misery of the Empire, Holy Church was wonderful to have yet the means to raise this lofty and rich edifice, which surpassed even the magnificence which General Crack was able to display from the accumulated plunder of two successful and unscrupulous careers.

After some delay Hensdorff was joined by Father St. Nikola, Leopold's confessor, and was not at all pleased to see that his master had chosen this travelling companion, for the politician was as mistrustful of the priest as the priest was disdainful of the politician; it seemed to Hensdorff a stupid action to bring a Jesuit into a Lutheran household.

But Father St. Nikola explained that he was remaining at

Monk until Leopold should require his presence at Bosenberg.

"Bosenberg!" exclaimed Hensdorff impatiently. "As soon as this affair is settled he must get back to Vienna or the headquarters of the army—"

"He has a pious fit," said the Jesuit, "and has spent many hours in the church here, he is much for solitude—"

"Bah!" cried Hensdorff, his harsh face wrinkling with annoyance. "Do you want to make a monk of him that you encourage these humours?"

"I have done my best to animate him with interest in worldly concerns," replied the confessor. "But you, as I, Count, must take notice of this melancholic strain in him. Is this marriage concluded?"

"I have no doubt that it will be," replied Hensdorff, who had no intention of letting the priest into the intrigue he had on hand. "But do not let it vex your delicate conscience, Father, the lady will leave her heresy."

He could easily promise this, since he never intended the marriage to take place, and it gave him a certain pleasure to deceive the keen and energetic priest.

Father St. Nikola let this pass; he remarked on the gorgeousness of the commodious monastery, the pulpit of sheer gold in imitation of Santa Maria Maggiore at Rome, the wine cellars where a horse and carriage could be turned with ease.

"It seems," remarked Hensdorff drily, "a flaunting to spend so much in the midst of starvation and ruin."

But the priest replied, with justice, that the great building with its sumptuous decorations had employed many hundreds of people and given a certain impetus to the Arts which had here been so liberally employed; to say nothing of the much needed lustre cast on the Imperial family.

At this point a young man entered the library and stood, rather reluctantly, within the cornice of the pilastered door.

SEVEN

COUNT MICHAEL HENSDORFF rose as Leopold stood hesitant, and the confessor discreetly withdrew to the far end of the immense gallery where he occupied himself by glancing over the titles of the learned books so nicely set out on the gilt shelves.

"I did not know," said Leopold rather sullenly, "that you were aware I was here."

"You might as well have informed me yourself, Sire," replied Hensdorff, "for I only had to learn of it from one of General Crack's spies."

Leopold blushed; he had thought his journey a profound secret; he disliked Hensdorff for having discovered it; he did not, in any case, love his minister though he considerably relied on him; he began now to defend himself without having been blamed, and this in a nervous manner.

"There was nothing for me to do in Vienna," he declared. "Everywhere I turn I find chaos and contradiction. I'm plagued to pieces. I thought," he added defiantly, "that I would settle at least one thing for myself. I've some interest in my marriage, I suppose?"

"Well," admitted Hensdorff, "as it turns out, it is fortunate that you have come, Sire, though these adventures are unsuitable to the times. We do not, Sire, live in the age of chivalry."

Leopold replied bitterly that this was an unnecessary reminder; he leant against the lofty window frame and gazed moodily across the intervening river at the vast and sweeping forests that bounded the horizon; Hensdorff noted with annoyance that he was carelessly dressed, and would make, on a stranger, a poor impression; there was nothing about him of that sense of a blaze of a great presence that one felt on meeting General Crack.

Leopold was, however, quite charming, very finely bred, with a fastidious air; in his childhood he had been spoilt as the only son of the Elector of Bavaria, greatest of German princes; in his youth he had borne the empty honours of King of the Romans during the vicissitudes of a cruel war which had given his father the title of Emperor and cost him everything else; he was now twenty-four years of age and had not shown any special gifts, though he had played a difficult part with dignity; during his father's lifetime he had been overshadowed, and since his father's death he had had little chance to distinguish himself; the French, briefly dominant in Austria, had forced his election and pledged themselves to his coronation, but his fortunes were still in a dangerous state of ebb and flow—mostly, as Hensdorff reflected, ebb.

His disposition was romantic; he had not yet shown any violent emotion of any kind; he was a learned dilettante in the Arts and had acquitted himself with credit as a soldier if he had cut no great figure as a general. His mother had been a Spanish princess; twice through the female side he had inherited that Hapsburg blood which gave him his perilous claim to Imperial honours, and showed in his too full lower lip and in a melancholy strain in his character. He had no sense of the humour of life; he saw his own comedy, but was not amused by it; he was continually afraid of being ridiculous in his own estimation.

In appearance he was pleasing if not notable, elegant, light blond, with a long countenance and arched nose very suitable for medals and triumphal arches, soft blue eyes and a pure complexion; most of what he did had a touch of uncertainty, but on occasion he had displayed a manly energy.

He asked now about the success of the mission to Prince Christian, as he scrupulously called the great mercenary soldier.

For answer Hensdorff drily produced the unopened letter with the Imperial seals.

Leopold coloured fiercely (to his own intense annoyance,

he blushed too easily) and tore his own missive indignantly across.

"I believe that you slighted him once," said Hensdorff. "At Belgrade—"

"Never," replied Leopold hotly. "He was always indifferent to me. Slighted? At Belgrade? You mean because I did not ask him to my table? I had forty ruling princes to entertain."

"It was the more slight to leave him out," remarked Hensdorff. "His achievements should blot out his birth."

"Insolent!" cried Leopold, tearing the letter again.

"He certainly is," agreed Hensdorff grimly. "Most men are who know they have a high value—he omits nothing to enhance his prestige. Ottenheim can rival Bosenberg."

"No doubt," said Leopold peevishly. "Both he and his father were rapacious thieves. I did not think he had refused my sister," he added bitterly.

"Nor did I," admitted Hensdorff, "but he is engaged on another affair. And through that we shall get him yet."

"Let him go," cried Leopold. "I wish to owe nothing to him—we will find another general."

Hensdorff took no heed of these brave words; he briefly outlined the Anhalt-Dessau intrigue and the necessity of relinquishing the Princess to General Crack.

"Why then," exclaimed Leopold in disgust, "I will go back to Vienna. Make your bargain, Hensdorff. I am glad to be out of a marriage with a Lutheran."

Hensdorff was irritated at this obtuseness.

"How can you sell what you haven't got?" he asked. "You must get Anhalt-Dessau to seal and sign the girl to you before you can assign her to Christian, Sire—he sees that, he's off to-day to get her for himself, and will, unless we put in with a higher price."

Leopold refused hotly to be party to any such design.

"Bargaining about women with a man like that, I get lower with every day of this business—"

"If you could offer your sister," Hensdorff reminded him, "you might countenance this—"

"I was overpersuaded to it," replied Leopold with tears of humiliation in his eyes. "And where has it led me?"

"To a point where you may get what you desire," snapped Hensdorff. "If he has refused your offer, at least we know of what he won't refuse."

"I dislike the whole business," protested Leopold. "I shall certainly return to Vienna and have no hand in it."

Hensdorff knew why he was so anxious now he was vexed to return to Vienna; there was a certain Countess Carola for whom he had a sentimental and platonic affection and who contrived to combine a philosophical coquetry with Leopold and a decorous fidelity to an elderly husband; Leopold rather fancied her as his *Aspasia* and confided to her his worldly troubles. Hensdorff thought it a fruitless and tiresome affair, and judged the arch Countess a boring *bas bleu*; he had no mind that Leopold should drift back to this virtuous pedant at such a crucial moment.

"If you throw up this, Sire," he said harshly, "you might as well throw up the whole thing—"

"I have a mind to," replied Leopold peevishly. "I never wanted this place, I doubt if I am suited to it, I meet nothing but vexation and tedium."

"That is the cry of most men," interrupted Hensdorff. "Who want the places they find themselves in? Very few. To be an emperor should be as amusing as most *métiers*."

"But to be an emperor without an empire—that is not amusing."

"I should have thought it might have been," retorted Hensdorff drily. "But Your Imperial Majesty is rather unamusable."

"I am too often the butt of the joke at which I am asked to laugh," said Leopold. "In this business now, into which you would thrust me, I cut the figure of a fool."

"Not at all," urged Hensdorff. "You can make Christian the fool—you dislike him?"

"No," replied Leopold candidly, "I do not, I have admired him; when I have seen him after a victory I have

envied him: there is something impelling and grand about the fellow—”

“Then why did you make him hate you?” demanded Hensdorff, exasperated. “All this difficulty is due to your slight of him—”

“I have explained that,” put in Leopold rather haughtily. “I treated him as what he was. And really his arrogance was intolerable.”

“It still is,” was the dry comment, “and none the less easy to bear from his having the whip hand. But if, Sire, you will deign to use a little tact, it will be he, not you, who will look the fool.”

Leopold declared that he could not see that, and added fretfully that this parcel of ill news might have been kept till after dinner.

“It cannot wait a moment,” answered the inexorable Hensdorff. “Christian is already ruffling it at Schönbuchel—”

“And I,” cried Leopold, “will not go there to compete with him!”

Hensdorff endeavoured to be patient.

“Why not use the fellow? Give him this little Princess for whom he has this infatuation, trust me to drive a hard bargain with him, let him give you this Empire, the lack of which you say makes you feel ridiculous, and then, when you want him no more, get rid of him—he will look foolish enough then, with nothing for his reward but a wife of whom he will probably have tired—”

“It is odd,” remarked Leopold, “that he should be so set on the lady. I had not thought him romantic or easily moved by sentiment—”

“There is not, I think, either romance or sentiment about it—but we have him on this unreasonable passion as we could have him on nothing else and I pray Your Majesty to take advantage of it.”

Leopold began to feel weary of the argument; he never could withstand Hensdorff for long; he was always too eager

to get back to his books, or his pictures, or his music or his mere idleness; he often dreamt of some delicious existence in which he could indulge these pleasures without vexations and where people like Hensdorff could never intrude.

Annoyed by his minister's persistency he now again spoke of resigning his tiresome dignities and going into some peaceful retreat.

"A monastery?" asked Hensdorff harshly. "I do not know where else Your Majesty would find a refuge, seeing that even your own Bavaria is in the hands of the enemy."

Leopold, stung by this, blushed, and walked away down the long gallery; he felt beset and cornered. Hensdorff was like a gadfly, with his urgent schemes—and yet, as he had just so crudely pointed out, where was the alternative?

To give up his pretensions seemed to be to give up life; he had his back to the wall, and must fight or be slain.

He approached Father St. Nikola, who was diligently reading the self-confident titles of the ponderous tomes on the gilded shelves; here was enough of polemics to have founded a dozen creeds and destroyed a dozen others—or would have been enough if any one had troubled to read these laborious arguments.

The Jesuit had the greatest respect for these works for the purpose of making the brain elastic and subtle in the arguments so useful to confuse the ignorant, but he had long passed the need of them, and eyed their grandiloquent array with the reflection that any one who saw this library must know that the good Brothers had another one not so publicly displayed.

"Father St. Nikola," asked Leopold uncertainly, "do you consider it would be worth any sacrifice to secure the services of Prince Christian?"

The Jesuit had thought that question decided long since; else why the Hensdorff mission, and the offer of the Archduchess?

"I certainly do, Sire," he replied at once.

"Every one seems agreed to put a high value on this man," sighed Leopold. "Remember, Father, he is now a renegade."

"Your Majesty must use such instruments as come to your hand," said the Jesuit glibly. "I should use every effort, Sire, to gain and retain a soldier like Prince Christian."

"Then I suppose I must do as Hensdorff suggests," answered Leopold reluctantly. "It is difficult to deal with Prince Christian, Father; a very overbearing, high-handed, insolent adventurer."

"No one is so arrogant as a successful soldier," admitted the priest, "and the Prince has been glutted with fame. But disregard all that, Sire, and use him while you need him, and leave him when you do not. There are ways," added the Jesuit, thoughtfully, "of removing those who cease to be of use."

Leopold glanced at him sharply.

"But one must be powerful to employ them," he answered.

"Let Prince Christian make Your Majesty powerful, and then punish him for any presumption in which he may now indulge."

This advice ran with that of Hensdorff, though it was more courteously offered; it was still, however, far from agreeable to Leopold, who wanted to be clear of the whole intrigue and never hear again of Anhalt-Dessau, the Princess Eleanora, or General Crack.

His thoughts turned longingly to the pale boudoir of the Countess Carola, where that graceful lady so often sat at her harp and listened with such deferential sympathy to his rather mournful meditations.

Father St. Nikola saw the expression of distress and hesitation on the fair face; he did not know the details of Leopold's interview with Hensdorff, but he shrewdly guessed that the former was tempted, in a fit of disgust at some of the minister's proposals, to give over all effort on behalf of his own rather doubtful cause.

"Sire," urged the Jesuit quickly, "no man of spirit and conscience would lightly resign—that—"

And he pointed to the beautiful country, river, wood, hill, lying, in all the pomp of summer loveliness, beyond the windows of the long gallery.

Leopold was always sensitive to such suggestions; beneath his flickering uncertainties was a constant, if baffled ambition; a lively, if fitful sense of birth and nationality.

"It is not for Your Majesty," smiled the Jesuit, quietly, "to be put out of your way by any one like Prince Christian."

The young man rallied to the pride of that; he felt that he ought, as Hensdorff had said, to use Christian for his own ends, despise him and cast him off when he had no need of him—surely the Imperial gesture.

"I suppose that I had better go to Schönbuchel," he admitted, "but it is very distasteful."

Hensdorff now strolled up, stroking his long, sour face with a wrinkled hand; Leopold felt hemmed in by these two personalities; he knew that he should do what they wished him to do, and, more, that what they wished him to do would be what he ought to do, so he mustered the best possible grace with which to submit.

They were wiser than he, he confessed, and infinitely stronger; right, of course, but if they had been wrong he could scarcely have resisted them.

So Leopold, with a gesture of resignation, permitted himself to be persuaded into the Anhalt-Dessau intrigue.

But he put off the journey till the afternoon under the excuse of the heat of the day and lounged, after dinner, in one of the alcoves of the library, exasperating Hensdorff by the delay while he strove to compose a paper of verses for the Countess Carola; but his mind had been so vexed that he got no further than:

"Like a dark rose opening to a heart of gold—
Like a deep river widening to the seas—"

EIGHT

AMELIA, Duchess of Schönbuchel, had been twice widowed and reached the age of seventy without finding life at all unpleasant; she continued to feel her own affairs very satisfactory, and those of others very diverting. There were many varieties of lunacy in her family, but she herself was extremely sane; she knew her confused pedigree and her hundreds of relations by heart, and could have recited, without pausing for breath, their multitudinous quarterings; for the rest, she did not trouble about them much. She had lately retired to Schönbuchel, at Dürsheim on the Danube, and there flourished in a comfortable solitude that she easily filled with small, but exciting, interests.

Here she occasionally endured the company of her second cousin, the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau, for the sake of that of his daughter, of whom she was exceedingly fond and in whose future she was sincerely interested.

She thought that the girl had been harshly brought up, and was altogether too dutiful, poor motherless creature, to her tiresome pedantic father, who tyrannized without stint over his only child. Eleanora endured his harshness with dutiful affection; she had an extremely sweet disposition.

From her cradle she had been a matrimonial prize, and the fit disposition of her hand had been a constant preoccupation with her father, who finally, after much debate, had leaned to Leopold of Bavaria when that prince's career had seemed more successful; since then, however, Prince Christian had come forward, with very definite advantages, and Leopold had suffered considerable reverses; so Anhalt-Dessau hesitated; he was a bigoted Protestant, and had been immensely moved in favour of Christian by his ready renunciation of Catholicism, whereas to achieve the Imperial

diadem his daughter would have to leave her hereditary faith.

The Duchess of Schönbuchel watched all these manoeuvres with zest; when she had a favourable opinion on them she was silent, but she gave her cousin the benefit of all her adverse criticism; he was not, therefore, very ready to stay at Dürsheim, but found it temptingly convenient to Vienna and Ottenheim.

War or peace seemed to make little difference to the revenues of the Duchess; the expectations of her heirs might be pinched but her expenses were not; she contrived to keep up all the state to which she had always been accustomed.

She had a passion for clothes and pet animals, and was very popular with her dependents, for she liked to see her inferiors enjoying themselves as long as they did their duties, and these they were very ready to discharge in the service of such a good-natured mistress.

She was, at present, a rigid prude, more from the advantage such an attitude gave her in censuring others than from any deep conviction, but she enjoyed a scandalous story in the right company (that of virtuous matrons) and was supposed to have afforded the theme for several such herself in the days of her active youth; she was able, however, to despise such rumours by a reflection on the lack of human charity which she had always found so conspicuous and at which she could scarcely wonder, for she admitted that to think the worst was generally to hit the truth.

All such cynical maxims, however, she kept from Eleanora, in whom she tried to inculcate those lefty ideals which she had always felt so dubious about herself.

Eleanora cared nothing about cynicism or ideals; she lived cheerfully from day to day, doing her lessons, reading her homilies, running about the house peeping into this and that, playing a little and dreaming a little; she was seventeen and had not a care in the world; she liked very much to come to Schönbuchel, the castle on the rocks overhanging the Danube opposite a small island so dark and lovely that it was surely inhabited by fairies, and ringed round by beauti-

ful hills that had an air of enchantment; she liked also to hear the stories of the Danube, the legends of Kriemhild and Siegfried, of knights and dragons and magic.

The Duchess did not encourage this taste; she knew the age to be practical and material, and no period for one whose head was filled with fairy tales.

Eleanora's father was also severely set against this romantic tendency, but for another reason; his strict Lutheranism thought such literature corrupting. Enervating tales of passion, crime and folly, he said, should have no place in the education of a Christian maiden.

"Bah!" cried the Duchess, when she heard him say this; and promptly became a party to smuggled books in her private chambers. "The child can't always be reading sermons," she said, glancing across at Eleanora in the window seat with a great volume found in the old library, and her keen old face, withered, sharpened and bleached, softened into a look of love.

Eleanora, in her deep absorption, appeared indeed a child; she was small, and her limbs very curved and delicate; in a catalogue of charms hers had not appeared so notable, but there was in her air, her movement, her gesture, her look, like a perfume, like a melody, some indefinable and potent fascination. Her grace and fragrance were not to be explained; there was something touching about her innocent liveliness, something moving about her delicious gaiety. She wore now a cambric dress and a sarcel net sash of saffron colour, while in the waves of her pale soft hair she had placed a knot of silvered ribbon given her by the Duchess, who delighted in making her these frivolous little gifts.

"What are you reading of?" asked the Duchess.

Eleanora glanced up, smiling; she could not say, the images in the old book moved in a confused impression across her mind, rich, brilliant and nameless.

"You must not stoop over books too much," added the old woman, "you will grow round-shouldered and you must not always have sweets in your pocket or you will spoil your teeth."

"How you look after me," smiled Eleanora, stretching like a little cat. "The sweets are only for when I do my Latin and Divinity. It helps me, when the words are hard, to have something pleasant to taste—" But she dutifully untied the silk bag at her waist and tossed it to the Duchess.

"Why don't you go out now, Eleanora, with Charlotte and take a walk in the woods? You might find some strawberries."

"It is too hot."

The day was indeed warm; a golden haze lay over the valley, the azure sky shimmered with heat; the Danube blazed in the sun; but in this chamber it was cool with dark green *mille fleurs* tapestry, and long mirrors that held shadows like water. There were two green parrots in ebony rings, white dogs in baskets, and a monkey asleep by a dish of fruit.

The Duchess, most comfortably disposed on a large sofa, was embroidering a chair back with her very complicated quarterings. She wore an old-fashioned robe of stiff brocade and a great deal of jewellery; hard, sparkling, heavily set.

"Have you seen Prince Christian?" she asked suddenly.

"I saw him on the terrace below this morning, walking with father," replied the girl indifferently.

"Do you think him at all like your Siegfried?" demanded the Duchess.

"Oh, no! Siegfried was fair."

"Well, he is a very handsome man. Don't you like him?"

"I have not seen much of him," said Eleanora, from whom all her matrimonial prospects had been carefully kept. "No, I don't think I do like him; he is overbearing, and stares so. He never says anything to me but 'good day,' and yet he makes me feel little and silly. Why do you ask him here, Aunt Amelia?"

"Your father wants to see him, about some of those dull affairs men get interested in—he is a great soldier, you know."

"Yes," replied the girl, who saw no enchantment in her own times, "but that isn't what it used to be, is it?"

"He certainly isn't a knight errant, if that is what you mean." The Duchess could hardly forbear a smile. "But he must be very interesting to talk to. I should like to have a conversation with him, I must say."

Eleanora did not answer; Christian hardly touched her little enclosed world; she had grown up in the midst of wars and confusions of politics, knowing nothing of either.

"I daresay we shall dine with him to-night," continued the Duchess. "And you shall wear that new pink dress with the sapphires—"

"Oh, can I? It is so pretty—"

"But skimped. The man cabbaged some of the stuff. But Charlotte will set it out very well, no doubt."

"I don't want to go down to dinner," said Eleanora, to whom these formal meals were periods of dull restraint and long conversations about subjects that she did not understand.

"No—it is usually very tedious, and your father so disagreeable. However, I suppose we must go, or it would seem a slight to Prince Christian."

"Who is he?" asked Eleanora idly.

The Duchess, who was usually so ready with every one's genealogy, was rather confused by this childish question.

"He is a Prince of Kurland," she answered, "and in all these ridiculous wars he has lost his kingdom."

"Why doesn't the Emperor give it back to him?"

"Because he is in trouble himself. It is all more than you or I will ever understand," said the Duchess briefly. "What you will have to be concerning yourself about," she added, "is your settlement in life—your father expects to see you married soon, so don't be dreaming too much of beautiful knights with yellow hair, for there are no longer any such creatures."

"As if I did!" laughed Eleanora. "And father says that I'm not to be married yet nor need think of it—"

The old woman gazed at her with furtive tenderness; she did not wish the girl soon married, for that would mean that she would lose the brightest and sweetest of her companions and she felt a yearning over the childish happiness so soon to be exchanged for a state by no means certain to be happy but sure to be full of care and trouble; to be the wife of any German prince would not, these tumultuous times, be too easy.

She was glad that Eleanora was indifferent to Christian, for in her heart she leant towards the Imperial match; though she had a shrewd knowledge of the value of these high-sounding honours, she could not resist the desire to see them worn by her favourite.

While the old woman and the girl were both drowsily silent, in the heat of the day, one with her needle, the other with her book, the door opened brusquely and the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau entered. Eleanora rose in a fright and could scarce make a reverence in her hurry to throw her frilled skirts over the forbidden book.

Even though she was successful in this she did not escape censure.

"What have you got in your hair, child?" asked her father sternly.

"A knot of ribbon that I gave her, Frederic," said the Duchess, while Eleanora pulled the offending string from her curls.

"Keep such adornments till you are out of tutelage," remarked the Prince, and taking the gaudy knot threw it out of the open window. "You, Madam, are too fond of making her a peacock and a popinjay."

"Frederic," said the Duchess acidly, "your temper and your manners are atrocious—you have no business to burst in like this—"

"I was too well aware that Eleanora was idling here. Herr Pffifer is looking for her, for her music."

Eleanora rose dutifully, contrived to cast a cushion over the book of legends, and ran out after two deep curtsies to her elders.

"You will make the girl a sickly *bas bleu*," remarked the Duchess, "with your pedants and tutors. Cannot you come here for a week or two without bringing these creatures with you?"

"If she does not occupy her mind with study it will be with worse things," replied the Prince. "She is inclined to dream and idle and you encourage her."

He was a small, lean, fair, faded man, with a dry, pompous manner of fussy self-importance; he was now secretly elated, for he had just received Leopold and Hensdorff, a visit which he considered very flattering. He did not intend to confide to the Duchess, who had never seen Leopold, the identity of the young guest; far less to his daughter; and he found the possession of this important secret very agreeable.

Walking up and down the room he began talking, rather at random, to hide his excitement. He had a harsh voice that made the parrots restless and started the dogs growling and snapping as he passed their baskets.

The Duchess, yawning, pulled him up.

"Have you given Prince Christian his dismissal?"

"No—but I shall. He was most insistent and high-handed, though I must say he offered the handsomest settlements and asks no dowry."

"Why?"

"Well, of course one can see why—he is anxious to connect himself with our family to cover up his own birth—and that's what sticks with me—"

"A man like that, though, it hardly matters."

"Oh, doesn't it? Besides, I dislike him."

"Eleanora is for the Emperor, then?" asked the Duchess, with a little pang for the heavy uncertainties that Imperial destiny involved.

"Yes, I think so; yes, really I think so—his cause looks very good—and if he were really established—well, one could hardly ask for a better match, eh?"

The Duchess secretly agreed, but could not resist pointing out the weak spot in the arrangement.

"She will have to leave the Lutheran Church."

"Well," replied the Prince, pettishly, "we will see about that—perhaps not, and anyhow we shall be able to wring large concessions for the Protestants from Hensdorff. It will give us all a great deal of influence in affairs."

And he proceeded to tell of the visit of Count Hensdorff with a young Bavarian officer, who had been urging him, in the most flattering manner, to conclude the alliance.

"Rather difficult having him here at the same time with Prince Christian, eh?"

"No—they seem on good terms. I should say that they have concluded some bargain, and, of course, if Christian takes up the Emperor's side again that will give him a tremendous chance—"

"But will he," asked the old lady, shrewdly, "if Leopold gets Eleanora? Is not that likely to send him over to the Allies in a rage?"

"Nonsense. He is a man of sense—there are many other princes who would gladly give him their daughters, as I must say I would have done myself if this other offer had not been so tempting."

He smiled cunningly to himself and added:

"Let Eleanora come down to dinner to-night, and set her out in the finery you are both so fond of. I want Hensdorff to take a good report to Vienna."

While these two people were discussing her immediate future, Eleanora was seated in a lower room, practising with a wizened music master, for whom she had little taste; she had no thought in her head but the heat of the afternoon, and how delicious it would be, when her task was over, to coax old Charlotte to take her into the cool, dark, green, still woods.

NINE

LEOPOLD was pleased when he was able to escape from Anhalt-Dessau and Hensdorff, and get away by himself out of the Château of Schönbuchel, which must be, for him, a place of restraint and humiliation. He dreaded the evening, when there would be a formal supper and he must meet the two ladies; but he was relieved to think that they would not know his identity, and that, so far, he had avoided encountering Christian.

He passed quickly through the small park and lawns of Schönbuchel and came out into the beautiful woods of Dürsheim.

It was the hour of sunset, and an exquisite ethereal light suffused the gorgeous scene—the majestic expanse of the river below, the rich sweeps of forests, the undulating hills, the hues of hyacinth and violets; the warm air was pure and soft, and full of the clean fragrance of the trees; the whole prospect so wide and high, so broad and lofty, with such a great expanse of scene and sky that Leopold felt that he was standing at the edge of the world surrounded by celestial space.

He entered the wood, so dark and hushed amid this last brilliance of the day, and had not gone many paces in on the forest path before he saw a girl seated beneath a beech tree—Eleanora, free, happy, and singing because the tasks of the day were over. By her side was a pottle of wild strawberries; her wide hat hung by a ribbon on her shoulders, and her hands were clasped round her knees; her pale, frilled dress was dappled with shade, and she was gazing up to follow the movements of a bird who moved through the flat clear foliage above.

Leopold stood still at some distance from her, but almost

instantly she was aware of him and looked round; a glance was sufficient to approve him as agreeable to the scene. She stopped singing, but she did not go away.

A lovely hour, a lovely meeting; the young man forgot all his vexations as if an enchantment had banished them from his mind. Uncovering, he asked:

"Where do these woods lead, Fräulein, and can I continue on this path?"

"I do not know," she smiled, "for I am never allowed to go very far."

"Nor do I," he answered, "desire to go any further."

"It is delightful here," said Eleanora. "I would like to live in the woods." She was so full of these thoughts that she could not avoid expressing them to this stranger, who seemed so gentle and courteous. "Is it not cool under the trees? And here, you can see the Danube, far below."

He came closer to her, and stooped to see the view she pointed out between the tree trunks; the last dance of the sunbeams through the leaves flashed on his light hair, and Eleanora looked at him with sudden pondering gravity.

"You are, sir, a stranger here?"

"Yes, and I am sorry for it—"

"I do not live here but I often come—here is Charlotte, she will tell you where the woods lead."

The elderly lady-in-waiting, who had been some paces behind the light walking of her mistress, now came along the narrow path and was agitated to see the stranger. Leopold wore an undistinguished civilian dress and she thought him some student on his holidays. Her worldly fluster reminded Leopold who he was; the brief magic of the moment had gone as he answered the unspoken enquiry of her look.

"I am staying at Schönbuchel," he explained, "with Count Hensdorff, and I was asking my way—"

Charlotte became very civil and gave long directions as to where the paths branched and where they led. Leopold did not hear this, though he appeared to listen; the girl's song still troubled his mind, and he was very conscious of her presence.

When Charlotte had finished her directions, she spoke:

"I hope, sir, you will have a pleasant stroll—no doubt I shall see you again, for I, too, come from Schönbuchel."

"You are not," asked Leopold impulsively, "the Princess Eleanora?"

"Yes," she smiled, "I am indeed she. Have you, sir, heard of me?" she added, for she considered herself a schoolgirl and was surprised that any one should know of her existence.

"I have heard of you," replied Leopold, blushing violently.

"Come," said Charlotte, gently drawing the girl's arm through her own, "we shall be late—and you, sir, do not go too far, if they expect you at supper."

"I shall not go at all," replied Leopold gravely. "Where could I find a more delightful scene?"

He leant against the beech tree where the girl had been sitting, and watched the two women pass between the trees towards the Château; Eleanora looked back and smiled with gracious candour, and Leopold felt the world enlarge, open out and bloom, like a flower breaking from the confinement of the bud into the completion of a rich blossom.

Everything about him appeared of an impossible beauty; the air rang with the cry of birds, each separate leaf of each tree, each blade of grass, appeared loaded with heavenly light; he could not believe that the river winding below was an earthly stream.

It was strange that never before had he noticed the surpassing loveliness of a common woodland scene, and he wondered, as he had never wondered before, at all the hurried circumstance and noisy incident of his short life that had so long prevented him from coming at a moment like this.

"How I have been led by other people," he reflected curiously, "been forced to this and that against my will—"

The sun had sunk behind the hills and the wood was suddenly full of shadows, deeper and lesser shadows crossing into distant dark as the trees closed in; the sky beyond seemed hollow with the withdrawing of the sun, the earth

also a vague emptiness, even the Danube faded into an ashy greyness.

Leopold sighed and turned slowly back towards Schönbuchel. As he turned into the park, doubtful of his mood and conscious of a tremulous exaltation, he heard a low voice which broke most rudely into his humour.

"Good evening, Cæsar."

Leopold started, and looking up, for his glance had been downcast, saw Christian mocking, lolling on a splendid marble bench beneath a twisted, leering statue of Silenus with pipes, that crowned a glade.

"Good evening, General Crack," replied Leopold coldly, stung by the disagreeableness of this meeting.

Christian leaned forward and laughed; he did not rise; his hat was on the seat beside him; he had not doffed it for Leopold.

"You seem in a pensive mood, Monseigneur," he remarked. "The scene is romantic, is it not?"

"I pray you, sir," answered Leopold stiffly, "respect my incognito. I would not have my presence here bruited about."

"Cæsar's commands shall be respected," said Christian with ironic deference. "They have my sympathy. No one," he added, "would know Cæsar without his purple—how easily is Imperial Majesty disguised!"

"But not so easily offended, Highness," said Leopold haughtily. "I shall not notice any of your provocation—"

"I have no wish to provoke you," smiled Christian. "I say, sir, you have my sympathy—my position is much as yours, you are Emperor of the West in the same fashion that I am Duke of Kurland."

Leopold bit his full lip, and retorted as indifferently as he could:

"And there the likeness ends."

"It does," admitted Christian. "There could hardly be two men more unlike than you and I."

Leopold wished to be gone, but could not; to walk away seemed like turning his back on an adversary; the other

man held him by his challenging air as powerfully as if he gripped him by the hand.

Against his will, then, Leopold lingered; against his will he was impressed by this bold presence in front of which he felt insignificant. He looked, fascinated, at the gorgeous figure adorned with military finery, the dark resolute face, with the brilliant eyes that never seemed to falter or droop, the smooth cheek that never seemed to change colour, the haughty lips that never seemed to quiver; he wished that he was such an unfaltering man, so superbly sure of himself, so contemptuous of others.

General Crack returned his reluctant scrutiny with a level gaze of indifference, lounging forward on the seat and swinging the great bullion tassels from his sword belt.

"We are oddly met here," he remarked.

"You speak," said Leopold with an effort, "as if I had offended you. I have never been conscious of doing so—"

"Nay," replied Christian. "I, like Cæsar, am above offence."

Never had Leopold known any one take with him a tone so bold as to touch insolence, and he felt his rather scornful indifference for this man become tinged with dislike, a definite dislike. Even the appearance of Christian repelled him; he thought that he looked as hard and gross as the grinning, massive figure of the sensual god behind him, and that there was something terrible in his calm, ironic aspect; in his steady look, so amused and penetrating.

"I can never work with this man," he thought. "Hensdorff does not know what he is about to suggest it—"

With aversion he recalled the intrigue that revolved round the innocent figure of the Princess Eleanora, and he walked away quickly, resolved to ignore Christian during the short time they should be together at Schönbuchel. He did not want to hate him, he had always had a nervous dread of hating any one, and how foolish to hate Christian, when there was nothing, for good or evil, between them; yet he feared that if he saw too much of him he would hate him; his mind, which had been so serene in the forest a few

moments ago, became confused and uncertain; his surroundings looked ordinary in the cold last glow of twilight.

He could not resist glancing back at Christian, immovable and implacable, seated lonely beneath the stone satyr.

The formal supper that evening was a simple meal; the Duchess, who did not know whom she entertained, had not put herself out very much; the appointments were modest, but she herself flaunted in a bespangled dress that she had worn, years ago, in Vienna at the Hofburg and her towering wig was garnished with strings of gems. She had also taken the trouble to set out Eleanora prettily, but the girl was awkward, because her hair was powdered for the first time, her dress was low and pinchingly laced, and the necklace of square sapphires seemed heavy on her neck. The company, too, oppressed her; every one was so much older than herself; every one save Leopold, and he, too, seemed embarrassed and silent. She ventured to glance at him with timid sympathy and thought how much pleasanter it would have been if they could have remained in the woods with Charlotte, quite late, as sometimes they did remain, and there have watched the moon rise till it was reflected in the waters of the Danube below.

Count Michael Hensdorff did not trouble to make himself very amiable to his neighbour, the useful and plain Baroness Charlotte, and the Prince of Anhalt-Dessau appeared in the rather foolish light of a dull man endeavouring to disguise flattered excitement.

Christian alone was at his ease; ignoring the rest of the company, he made himself so obliging to the Duchess that she half regretted he was not destined for Eleanora, and she began to laugh and talk quite loudly, recalling anecdotes of her youth.

As the meal proceeded, Leopold and Eleanora glanced at each other more and more frequently across the table. A branch of candles stood between them that cast a glow over them, that brought them out, fair and pale, with a clear radiance against the dark background of the room. When the dessert was brought, Leopold leant forward and rather

shyly asked Eleanora if these were the strawberries that she had gathered in the woods? He saw Christian looking at him.

"So you met in the woods?" asked Anhalt-Dessau, pleased.

"For a moment," said Leopold. He leant back in his chair and gazed out of the window at the end of the room, which stood open on the wide dark. The evening was very hot; Eleanora felt weary in the heavy metallic brocades, in the hoops and panniers to which she was not accustomed; she also glanced towards the window, like one unconsciously glancing at an avenue of escape.

A pause fell in the talk; even the rapid tongue of the Duchess was silent; she was flushed and sleepy with her own good food and her own generous wine; she made the signal for the ladies to rise. Eleanora got up eagerly, but she was remorseful, when she saw the mournful look in Leopold's blue eyes, to think that she was leaving him to a boredom that she had herself escaped.

With the departure of the women, Anhalt-Dessau felt slightly embarrassed; he did not know quite how to manage the situation between these two pretenders to his daughter's hand. Leopold seemed equally awkward and sat silent, crumbling his bread into balls on the cloth.

Christian surveyed them all calmly, as if he found them diverting, for Anhalt-Dessau was forcing a conversation about indifferent matters on Hensdorff, who could scarcely disguise his tedium.

And in the air of Leopold, in his droop and silence and nervous fidgeting with the bread, was profound confusion and distress.

Christian rose at length and carelessly begged for leave to depart; he had, he said, letters to dictate for Pomerania and Kurland.

"To-morrow," he added, "I must go back to Ottenheim."

"To-morrow?" exclaimed Hensdorff, who thought that matters could hardly be settled so soon.

"To-morrow," repeated Christian as if delivering a fiat, and left them to themselves.

Sensitive to the manner of these words and this exit, Leopold, colouring, turned to his host. There was something modest and anxious in his manner that annoyed Hensdorff as much as it flattered Anhalt-Dessau.

"I, too, must return to-morrow," he murmured. "I hope that you, Monseigneur, will make a conclusion of the business we have in hand."

"Sire, it is made," replied Anhalt-Dessau, who had been hurried already by Hensdorff. "As to the details, those have not yet been all decided—but," he added, both flurried and pompous, "for my daughter, that is settled. I am deeply honoured to give my consent to the marriage—you, may, Sire, have my word on that—"

"Have you told Prince Christian this?" asked Leopold nervously.

"Yes, I gave him his reply this afternoon, Sire. I was as courteous as possible and he took it in good humour."

"No doubt," thought Hensdorff drily, "with the winning card up his sleeve."

"And she, the Princess Eleanora, she does not know?"

Anhalt-Dessau was surprised at this question.

"How should she know, who knows nothing, Sire?"

"Of course," murmured Leopold, "of course."

There was a restraint, both about him and Hensdorff, that was noticeable even to the dull perceptions of their host, and he thought with annoyance that perhaps this young man had not liked his daughter, who had seemed to him to look so charming to-night in her first grown-up dress; but he reflected that her usual vivacity and grace had been eclipsed and that she might have made a poor impression.

Stammeringly he began to excuse her, to talk of her docility, her learning, her sweet temper; Leopold stared at him as if he could not understand what he was saying, then rose suddenly, which brought the other two men to their feet.

"I—I do not need this," he stammered. "Of course she—it is unnecessary to discuss her," he added abruptly, and remained standing there, diffident and troubled, looking away

from both of them. "Hensdorff will tell you all my mind—he understands it very well—"

He bowed nervously to his host and left them; Hensdorff shrugged as the door closed.

"It is a boy," he remarked. "Still unstable and capricious."

"He is in an awkward position," replied Anhalt-Dessau, who saw Leopold glorified by his honours. "I find him most gracious and affable. I am delighted, my dear Count, at this alliance," and he could not forbear indulging a vision of himself at Vienna, important, at his daughter's court, pompous at the Hofburg.

He was, indeed, so excited now he had made this great resolution that he could not resist asking his daughter, as he came into her little boudoir to bid her good night, whether she liked Captain Leopold?

"That poor young man whom no one took any notice of?" said Eleanora. "Yes, I liked him quite well."

She was puzzled by her father's sly, agitated manner and by his question; she answered with instinctive flippancy to disguise the fact that she had indeed been impressed favourably by the stranger, so urbane and courteous, so elegant and modest. She felt happy when she thought of him, and happy because her father seemed pleased with her, and kissed her with greater affection than usual, and never chided her about the book of legends on her dressing table. She went to bed so, in the gayest of spirits, to dream of the woods at sunset, and the Danube gliding away beyond the hills.

But Leopold did not sleep; he had called Hensdorff into his room and was talking with him violently and tempestuously, though in hushed tones, remembering that he was in a stranger's house.

TEN

NEVER had Hensdorff known the young man so difficult. He violently and positively refused to be party to the intrigue that his minister had mapped out for him, or to make any sacrifices to gain the services of General Crack.

"Let him go where he pleases—I care not at all. What I cannot get without him I will forgo. This will lead to nothing but disaster; I will not be so persuaded against myself."

"What is, then, your intention?" asked Hensdorff wearily. "What game, sir, do you expect me to play?"

"None at all," replied Leopold. "Let the matter be straightforward. I will keep my engagement with Anhalt-Dessau and try to carry my own fortunes to success."

Brave, flourishing words, but Hensdorff smiled.

"Does, then, Your Majesty intend to marry the Princess Eleanora?"

"Yes," replied Leopold impetuously. "It is the alliance you, sir, found for me."

"But Prince Christian is more important than the lady," explained the minister, with an air of fatigue. "When shall I be able to persuade Your Majesty that he is *essential* to your cause?"

"Never," replied Leopold, "for I do not believe it."

Hensdorff cast about in his mind for some means to end this tiresome argument; he had believed that he and Father St. Nikola had mastered Leopold's obstinacy, and now it had started up afresh. He looked sharply at the young man, who seemed very flushed and agitated, who walked about and sat down and rose up in restless nervousness; in the plainness of his dress and the disorder of his blond locks he did not look either distinguished or imposing, and Hensdorff, glancing him up and down, struggled with a sick desire

to drop this rebellious puppet, and with him the whole disjointed show.

If only there had been something else!

But there was nothing.

Useless for one who did not believe in Heaven to renounce the World: that would be to fall into a void.

"Is Your Majesty's change of mind due to the acquaintance of the Princess?" he asked, for he had remembered Herr Lippmann's words about Prince Christian, and if one young man, why not another? She was, too, a pretty little creature.

Leopold vehemently denied this.

"I have hardly seen her, hardly spoken to her—it is manifest that she is well bred and docile, but she has nothing to do with my resolution."

"To what, then, is that due?"

"To disgust of the whole affair, to dislike of this bargaining, intriguing—"

He sat down by the lamp and put his blond head in his white hands.

"I tell you, Count, I am sick of it—"

"So am I," interrupted the minister drily. "Shall we then, Sire, give everything up and become hermits?"

Leopold blushed at his rebuke, which he saw was intended to turn him into ridicule.

"There is no other alternative," continued Hensdorff. "If you live in the world you must live on the world's terms. I myself have no illusions—often I ask myself, 'What is the use?' but I go on because I do not know how to stop, because there is nothing else to do."

"That is a dreadful doctrine," murmured Leopold. He thought of the wood, the singing girl with the basket of strawberries, the heavenly beauty of that evening hour, and he thought of this like a way of escape from the hard, cynical, hopeless existence that Hensdorff spoke of and in which he, too, seemed involved.

"You may, Sire, if you will," added Hensdorff, "consider our obligations to your family and your Allies—while you

amuse yourself with fastidious scruples, these others hang with harrowing anxiety on the turn of events. Hourly I expect news that the congress has broken up and the enemy is on the move. What, in that case, do you intend to do? Fly into the marshes of Styria?"

"I shall not fly," replied Leopold hotly.

"Then perhaps you will submit to the Queen of Hungary and do homage to her husband as Emperor? Or go to Paris and join Prince Charles Edward as a pensioner of the French?"

"I do not know why you seek to inflame me!" cried Leopold bitterly.

"I do not," replied Hensdorff, dispassionately and wearily. "I merely seek to know your mind."

"I do not know it myself," admitted the baffled, distressed and baited young man, "but at least I will not give up this marriage to bribe Prince Christian—"

"And the Empire is to be sacrificed to that!" exclaimed Hensdorff scornfully. "It is as well, Sire, that your father is dead before he could see his policies and his efforts thrown to the winds."

And he thought to himself, "The romantic young fool is taken with the girl, and out of jealousy will not give her up."

Leopold read this thought in the dull, sunken eyes of Hensdorff; he saw himself summed up as a facile, irresolute, sentimental boy, and he put again his hands before his sensitive face, wincing at the truth in this judgment.

Hensdorff rose and yawned; it was useless to prolong the dispute; if Leopold was to fail like this he must set about making his pact with the Queen of Hungary and that would be difficult, for he had gone very far in services to the House of Bavaria.

"I will leave Your Majesty," he remarked, and his emphasis on the title sounded like mockery to Leopold, "to consider that by to-morrow all must be decided."

"It is decided now," replied Leopold defiantly.

Hensdorff paused by the door.

"Do you recall," he asked, "all the councils and disputes, all the advice and anxious consultations in Vienna before the resolution was come to that at all costs Prince Christian must be secured? Even at the cost of your sister, Sire?"

Leopold writhed; he did indeed remember those hideous days in Vienna, the tedium, the boredom, the confusion, the pressure brought on him on all sides to do what he loathed to do, the alarms and fears—

"And I suppose all that," added Hensdorff, "goes for nothing. The resolution so painfully taken is to be thrown over for a whim?"

Leopold had no answer, and Hensdorff, as he departed, had one last dry reproach to fling behind him:

"It is useless to dispute an empire if you are to be put out of your way by a girl."

Leopold, left alone, raged at this, but the truth of it was forced into his soul like a dart; he had been unsettled, made irresolute, wretched, by the sight of a strange girl in a romantic setting.

Until he had seen the Princess Eleanora he had been prepared to give her up; now, even though he denied to himself that she fascinated him, he had decided not to do so.

He passed a miserable night, tossing, distracted, angry with everything; he would have been yet further discomposed had he known that his host sat up almost to the dawn with Herr Lippmann, absorbed in the glasses, mirrors, charts and diagrams the astrologer expounded to him, and by that worthy's glib and flowing talk.

The Prince of Anhalt-Dessau combined a rigid Lutheranism with a vast love of the marvellous; he continually murmured, "incredible," "impossible" to the wonders that Herr Lippmann unfolded, but he was secretly impressed and delighted.

The alchemist was too acute to venture on any crude predictions in favour of Prince Christian, but he did not fail to work into his discourse some considerable eulogies of his master.

He declared that he had, from the first, foretold the

extraordinary success of Christian, and now saw in the future a yet brighter destiny for this favourite of fortune.

"And what of Leopold?" asked Anhalt-Dessau. "What is there in store for him?"

Herr Lippmann snatched at this opportunity; he shrugged his shoulders and pulled down his mouth.

"Disaster," he said briefly.

Anhalt-Dessau was startled.

"Oh?" he cried, "but his prospects look fair—"

"Do they?" smiled the alchemist, who could guess by the other's consternation that he had promised his daughter to the Emperor. "And what do you think of the man himself?" he added confidentially. "I see he is here, incognito; now one of the penetration of Your Highness must have observed his weakness, his vacillation, his immaturity, his lack of all manly qualities."

"No, no," said Anhalt-Dessau, alarmed. "I saw nothing of the sort, I was favourably impressed by him—Count Hensdorff told me—"

Herr Lippmann calmly took up the word.

"Count Hensdorff is an old fox, he knows how to give a turn to things! Naturally he makes the best of Leopold. But believe me, it will be all for nothing—"

"For nothing, eh, for nothing?"

"He has not the material to deal with. Think, instead, of Christian—there's a man for you! Why, he could pitch Leopold off the throne and mount it himself if he wanted to—he might have been Czar of all the Russias if he had cared to marry Olga Petronova who was madly enamoured of him—there's nothing he can't do. And his wealth! He's more money than any one in the Empire."

Anhalt-Dessau felt uncomfortable; he mentally contrasted Leopold and Christian, not to the advantage of the former.

"It is a pity his birth is base," he murmured.

"There is a doubt about that," said the alchemist boldly and darkly. "It may yet be disclosed that he is really a Ketlar and the Duke of Kurland."

"No! How is that possible?"

"I am not allowed to say," replied Herr Lippmann mysteriously. "But there was a mystery and investigations are being made."

He spoke a half truth; some years before, Christian had employed him to search into the painful story of his birth, but without any result save that of confirming the fact that he was undoubtedly the son of the Italian Columbine and possibly not the son of the Duke of Kurland; only, by chance, had he thought of this now as something with which to impress Anhalt-Dessau who was plainly discomposed and lost interest in the mirrors and telescopes, for which the alchemist was heartily thankful, as he was weary of explaining marvels to a flaccid and credulous mind.

"Of course, there is nothing in any of this," said the Prince nervously. "One must not pay any attention to this sort of thing."

"Well, Monseigneur," interrupted the astrologer, "just let me give you this advice—if you want to put faith in either of those men, put it in General Crack."

When his tedious visitor had gone, Herr Lippmann congratulated himself on having done a good stroke of work for his master, which he had achieved with the better will since he sincerely had little enough faith in Leopold and a very honest admiration for General Crack.

There were, however, more powerful aids than the predictions of an astrologer coming to the assistance of Christian, whose affairs at that moment seemed under the protection of a special Providence.

With the morning came a messenger, sent on from Mölk, who had come from Vienna almost on the heels of Leopold. He brought the worst of news; the congress at Brussels had flown asunder in bitter disagreement, and the well-prepared armies of the Allies were already in movement.

Maréchal De Lisle, Governor of Frankfurt and now at Prague, in command of the French forces in the Netherlands, had sent an urgent message for Imperial assistance,

and an entreaty, which was almost a command, that Leopold would engage General Crack, to whom, for their part, the French were ready to offer considerable bribes.

With these dispatches were two feeble feminine notes for Leopold, one from Maria Luisa, his sister, and one from the Countess Carola.

Hensdorff took them all to Leopold's bedside, threw them down on the coverlet, and stood over the dismayed young man, bidding him read them.

"You see, Sire, it is exactly as I warned you."

Leopold spitefully tore up the Countess Carola's note without reading it; he thought of her with distaste, and her gushing alarms came very ill just now; irritating, too, was his sister's timid letter, talking of the panic in the capital, begging for his return, and asking if she were indeed to be betrothed to Prince Christian?

"I do not know how to move!" he exclaimed. "Is there not any one else, besides this man, to whom we can turn?"

Hensdorff had answered this protest so often that now he received it in silence. Useless to go again through the miserable list of the discredited, defeated generals, who were all who were left to lead the Imperial ranks; formal, arrogant fools like Fürth and Olivenza.

Leopold had risen out of bed and put on his chamber robe; he had scarcely slept all night and under this ill news felt giddy; he turned to the window to be rid of Hensdorff's yellow sour face, and the loveliness of the morning blooming on the river and the valley seemed like a reproach. Again he thought of the wood, and the girl beneath the beech tree; and the dispatches shook in his hand.

But the keen, inquisitive gaze of Hensdorff, his tormentor, nerved him; he made an effort to control his confusion, his fear of, and repugnance to, his task.

"I will," he declared, "see this man myself. Ask him to come here, now—I must overlook his insolence—"

"Ask whom, Sire?"

"This General Crack—ask him to come."

In half an hour Christian was there, facing Leopold in

the small anteroom to the bedchamber that had been given him in the Château Schönbuchel; the windows had been set wide open on the valley, and the apartment was full of the pure thin Austrian air and the bright light of early morning.

Leopold, in his black with the silver shoulder knot—black and silver, the colours of the House of Hapsburg—leaned against the wall by the windows with the dispatches in his hand. He was, as usual, carelessly attired and his blond hair was undressed—he had brought but one body servant with him and was impatient of his administrations—but Christian was set out as if he were going on parade, with every braid, buckle and button gleaming, his clothes without a wrinkle or a speck of dust, fresh from the barber and the hairdresser, and as stiff and expressionless, Leopold thought, as a wooden soldier.

"We have come, Highness," the Bavarian said with dignity, "to a point when we do not need a go-between. What there is to settle, we can settle ourselves."

"No doubt," answered Christian. "It is, Sire, one to me who settles the matter. But it must be to-day that it is settled."

"Doubtless," replied Leopold, tolerating him with an effort, "you know how I am pressed. And my advisers think you are the man I need."

"Sire, I have heard all this from Count Hensdorff and gave him my answer."

"Not too civilly, I think," said Leopold, firing up. "By Heaven, Monseigneur, you make it difficult for me!"

"Circumstance, not I, makes the difficulty," remarked Christian unmoved. "It is not easy to beg favours of one, Sire, you dislike—"

"I have not disliked you," protested Leopold.

"You have disregarded me," replied Christian. "You do not willingly turn to me now; you may as well, Sire, have matters clear—"

"And you as well keep courteous," interrupted Leopold haughtily.

"Remembering that I speak to Cæsar? But it is not my courtesy you want to buy, Sire."

"No," replied Leopold, mustering all his patience. "I bargain with you for your sword, Highness. If you will take command of all my forces—"

"I want Anhalt-Dessau's daughter," said Christian, coldly. "I go neither up nor down from that demand."

"I will not give it," replied Leopold, with a shuddering resolution.

"Then I daresay that we shall meet on the battlefield, Sire, for I go at once to join the Queen of Hungary's husband."

He turned as if to leave the room; only the sight of the fatal dispatches in his hand gave Leopold the resolution to speak any words to stay his going.

"Why are you so set on this lady?" he asked.

"Why are you so set on withholding her?" counter-demanded Christian.

"Anhalt-Dessau has already refused her to you—"

"He will withdraw that refusal if you bid him—when Cæsar is out of the lists, General Crack may be good enough."

Leopold looked away, out of the window, to refresh himself by that exquisite expanse of sunny landscape, and to be rid of the sight of that cold showy face General Crack bent on him.

"I," continued the implacable soldier, "am no more eager to serve under you, Sire, than you are eager to employ me. But since I must set some man up, it may as well be you if you will pay my price."

"Any price but the price you ask—"

"You have nothing else to offer that I care about," smiled Christian. "Neither your honours, Sire, nor your sister tempt me."

This was too much for Leopold; he threw down the dispatches into the window seat.

"Then you must go," he declared hotly, "for I see we can conclude no business."

"Shall I tell Count Hensdorff so?" asked Christian mock-

ingly. "Come, Sire, do not make all this delay and question. I do not ask what you should grudge."

The words made Leopold ashamed of the weight he had given to his own speech; he felt insignificant before the other's irony; this time yesterday he had not seen her—a girl in a wood! he might so soon forget; he felt exhausted by his own effort at strength and resolution.

Count Hensdorff and Father St. Nikola (who had accompanied the dispatch rider) entered showing grave faces; neither of them had trusted Leopold to bring this momentous interview to a satisfactory climax. At sight of them Leopold felt himself hemmed in, forced, overwhelmed as usual when they together bore down on him.

He sank in the window seat and put a trembling hand to his forehead. He thought, "She was destined for me, she was almost mine, and they will take her away."

"His Imperial Majesty," said Christian, "refuses my terms."

At that, Leopold heard the two others, minister and priest, talking together; harshly, impatiently, persuading him, reproaching him, pelting him with State arguments till his head ached and his heart sickened.

And what had he to oppose to all this wisdom?

A few moments in a wood at sunset.

His two tormentors persisted, to the limit of the endurance of his nerves; they seemed to him to be bearing down on him, enclosing him with their dark figures, their old, harsh faces, their insistent voices; and, worse than them even, he was conscious of General Crack, silent, assured, waiting with the sleek patience of a beast certain of its prey.

After half an hour of this torture, Leopold gave way, with a shudder of disgust for himself, with a quiver of hatred for them.

"Settle it, then!" he cried to Hensdorff. "Only let me be gone. Ay, you are all very cunning, but this may be a bad day's work for some of you—"

Christian's dark eyes, void of all expression, turned

slowly on him as he gave this threat, which he himself felt to be futile. It was the last humiliation for Leopold that his rival showed no sign of triumph; now that Christian had gained his point he preserved the same icy indifference that he had shown while it was in debate; a hateful pose, this, of godlike calm!

Passionately, Leopold wished that he could emulate such serenity; as he left them he was swearing hotly to himself, "If I ever have any power I will break that man—God, how I will break him."

He wished to leave Schönbuchel without being observed, but he was not so fortunate as to achieve this. While he was hurriedly having his horse out (for he meant to ride at once and alone to Vienna) Eleanora came out on one of the little bowed balconies over the forecourt. She had been much petted that morning, for her father had told the Duchess the secret of Captain Leopold's identity and of the betrothal.

She smiled candidly at the young man, for she had been assured that he had come to be her companion and that she might walk with him in the woods and along the banks of the Danube, for they wished her to know her destined husband.

"Now, to-day, when Charlotte is ready, we can take that walk in the forest," she said, as she tied the wide ribbons of her straw hat under her chin. "It is so beautiful! And we can picnic in the woods."

These words were like a blow over the heart to Leopold. He stared at her so strangely that she thought him ill, and a tender concern clouded her gaiety.

"Something has happened?" she faltered.

"I must go back to Vienna," he answered. "I shall never be able to walk in those woods—"

"Oh, don't go!" cried Eleanora, piteously (she had dreamt of him all night). "Back to the city, when here it is so lovely?"

"It is not for me," said Leopold in bitter distress. He could not bring himself to say "good-bye" but mounted and rode away.

But he must pause again, for by the gates was the Duchess, leaning on her stick, alarmed at his departure, at his hurried looks. He saluted her mechanically and she dropped a trembling curtsy.

"Sire," she stammered, "they tell me that you are the Emperor—"

"They tell you wrong, Madam," he replied, "for I am nothing, nothing."

He rode away, alone.

ELEVEN

LEOPOLD rode slowly along the banks of the Danube towards Vienna. He did not pause till he had reached the grandiose edifice of Mölk, forty miles from the capital. He had not brought with him his modest baggage or his one body servant; save for a few crowns in his pocket he was unequipped for the journey; he lingered now, wretched, undecided, thinking of his destination with vexation and bitter distaste.

He halted at the rough inn which was one of the cluster of miserable houses at the foot of the bold jutting rock from which rose the sweeping walls and lordly cupolas of Mölk. Dismounting, he ordered food; to be served outside, for he could not endure the filthy interior of the inn. By the rude table under the rusty, withered vine he watched the flies buzzing in and out of the soiled beer mugs, while by his feet the starving fowls scratched in the dust; a melancholy, a sordid scene scarcely redeemed even by the grand beauty of the landscape.

He overheard two peasants drinking near him talk about the hermit who lived the other side of the gorge. This word "hermit" attracted him—he remembered what Hensdorff had said when he suggested he would "throw it all up and become a hermit."

Leopold wondered idly what a hermit really was. He would snatch at any delay if he could only put off the moment of his arrival in Vienna—the moment when the dull formality of the Hofburg would close over him again.

The figure of the Princess Eleanora continued to dance before his eyes like a spark of gold. He could not believe he had actually seen her standing on the balcony, saying "Don't go, don't go away." Or had she really said that or had it merely been a cry, an appeal in her blue eyes, not

on her trembling lips? He could see her beneath the beech with her pottle of strawberries. It might have been a dream for all the unearthly ravishment of beauty it held, that picture; but he knew that she was left behind in Schönbuchel, wondering why he had ridden away, at this moment, probably wondering that . . .

He asked the ragged landlord, who seemed to consider him the same quality as the other travellers, where this hermit lived? The fellow stupidly replied that it was the other side of the gorge, he believed.

"If you cross the ravine at the bridge you will see the hermit's cave."

Leopold left his horse in the wretched stable and went out in search of this bridge; a hermit seemed an odd, fantastic personage; he might be full of good advice; Leopold was always searching for good advice.

By midafternoon, in the great blaze of the heat, he had discovered the bridge. He was tired; the scenery seemed to overpower him, the rocks were too high, too brightly coloured, the sky too blue, the sun too fierce in the thin air. He was glad of the shadow that lay on the ravine; he was glad of those darker shadows in the recesses of the jutting rocks and of that cool steady swirl of water beneath the slender bridge and of the paler shade of the trees beyond bridge and rocks.

Soon he found the hermit; the man lived in a cave that had been partially hollowed out by human hands. It was overhung with clusters of bright, clear, sharp-fronded ferns; in front of this rude habitation was a little plot of cultivated ground in which grew vegetables and a few apple trees.

Leopold paused, sat down on a smooth stone, and looked at this little remote garden, so different from any garden he had seen before. It was very beautiful, sheltered from the sun by the enormous boughs of the trees that grew high up the rock and with those beautiful knots and clusters of all manner of plummy, airy ferns, vivid and gorgeous; the dripping of the crystal waters which slid down from the upper rock cast a silver lustre over the dark surface of the stone.

Leopold was not wishful to disturb the hermit, he felt fatigued and strange sitting here in this out-of-the-way spot. It seemed impossible that this very morning he had flung out of Schönbuchel in such hot, dull fury.

Presently the hermit himself appeared leading a couple of white goats. There was nothing fantastic about his appearance; he was dressed like any peasant in a rude coat girdled round the waist; a battered hat protected his head from the sun, a ragged beard descended to his waist.

He greeted Leopold without surprise.

"Are you," asked the young man negligently, "the hermit?"

"Yea," replied the other, smiling, "that is what they call me round about here. You know the odd words people use?"

"Yes," said Leopold. "Words do not mean very much to me, but I am forced very often to regard them. You, then, are the hermit?"

"Yes, and who are you?"

Leopold replied as he had replied to the Duchess, "I am nothing," and with an echo of that deep bitterness.

"Nothing then speaks to nothing," replied the other man. "Why," asked Leopold, curiously, "do you live here retired from the world?"

"And why," was the reply, "do you live in the world?"

"I do not know," said Leopold.

"Neither do I," smiled the other. "Will you come in and have a meal?"

Leopold answered that he had already partaken of wine and refreshment in the atrocious inn below.

"What made you come up here?" asked the recluse.

"Curiosity," admitted Leopold.

The hermit remarked that no other reason ever brought any one up to these lonely defiles; Leopold, leaning forward with his long face in his hand, and his elbow on his knee, demanded why this man had discarded the world, why he lived in this curious spot?

The hermit did not seem wishful to answer these questions; he tethered his goats to the stump of an old tree,

seated himself on one of the smooth boulders ringed with ferns close to Leopold.

"The place," remarked the young man, "is extraordinarily beautiful."

"I do not know," smiled the hermit, "that beauty makes very much difference to anything. I cease to notice the beauty, and the peace; both have become commonplace to me."

"You might as well, then," pondered Leopold, "live in a city."

The hermit said that he might as well, save that in the city one must spend money, and he had never had money nor the capacity to earn any; here he was freed of that anxiety; at best, able to let life slip through his fingers as the fine sand slipped through the hour glass, without sound. Leopold was pleased by this simile, soothed by the way it was given; he wondered if this state of mind was more easily achieved in these solitudes than in those grand halls where he repined so fretfully.

"I," he said, wistfully, "have often wished to retire from the world; it seems impossible—I am hemmed in all directions."

"Every one says that," replied the hermit. "There is no one so mean or so poor or so insignificant that he does not believe himself chained down by some circumstance."

"Supposing," asked Leopold, smiling at this misreading of him, "that you were the Emperor?"

The hermit replied mildly that he could not suppose any such thing. "I have forgotten," he admitted, "that there is such a person as the Emperor, and I pity him."

"So," said Leopold, "do I"; and then he asked suddenly: "What do you think of hatred? Is not it a terrible thing—hatred? It is worse to hate than it is to be hated."

"Of course," agreed the hermit. "You may avoid the hatred given out by some one else but you cannot avoid the hatred that you give out."

"What do you mean by avoid?" asked Leopold. "What is it that I should avoid?"

"Hatred," answered the old man placidly.

"Hatred, then," mused Leopold, "is a disaster. I thought so, I felt that, but I cannot control it; I must and I do hate."

"That," said the hermit, "is very terrible; worse for you than for the person you hate."

"I know," said Leopold. "It is unavoidable; I hate because I am weak—I have no courage to defend myself openly therefore I revenge myself secretly."

He dropped his slender right hand from his cheek and clasped it in his left across his knee. The hermit noted the grace and fineness of those hands.

"You are very young and elegant to deal in such deep matters," he observed.

"I am," sighed Leopold, "both young and foolish, and extremely distressed; I go here and there to find comfort."

"You think you might discover it in my retreat?" suggested the hermit.

"It is possible, but not, I think, very probable."

"You look to me like one of those worldly men who will only find consolation from worldly disasters in worldly affairs."

"Don't talk to me of the world," said Leopold, "for there I have been utterly defeated."

Against the grand and jocund landscape he saw the slight figure of a dreaming girl standing on the balcony in the early sunshine, her eyes, or her lips, or her whole being, saying, "Don't go away,"—and he had gone; ridden away, shamed.

"What is your station in life," asked the hermit, "who are already so young and so troubled?"

"My station in life," said Leopold, "is my greatest trouble. I want to escape from it and I can't."

"It is yourself you cannot escape from," said the hermit, "not your station. If you were to live up here with me you would not be able to escape either."

"You, then," urged Leopold, "are as unhappy here as you were in the world?"

The hermit replied that he had never been unhappy anywhere.

Leopold gazed forlornly round the luxurious landscape.

"Yesterday this seemed magic to me," he complained, "but to-day it seems all tarnished, the bloom rubbed off, the trees look rusty and the water foul, the sky void."

"You, I suppose," remarked the hermit, "think that Nature takes the colour of men's moods. Nature, of course, is quite indifferent as to whether you admire her or don't admire her; whether she is beautiful or ugly in your sight."

"That is true," said Leopold gloomily. "Yesterday, as I said, I felt that I was in a paradise; now I seem to see grim rocks, a dreadful whirl of purposeless water, expanses of haunted forests."

"You speak very extravagantly," smiled the hermit. "I think you are one of those fantastic young men who are rather fond of indulging in fabling dreams and the grotesque and unlikely."

"My story," replied Leopold, "is most commonplace. There is nothing grotesque or unlikely about it. I am merely weak and foolish—overweighted by my own cowardice, my own failure, the sense that I shall be driven to do something mean and vile—yes, I feel I shall commit some dreadful action!"

The old, dry man received these outbursts placidly. He did not seem in the least moved either by the stranger's presence or by his emotion; he occupied himself in gazing at his goats and rearranging their ropes round the stump of the tree where he had fastened them.

"You seem," remarked Leopold, ironically, "to find those animals more interesting than myself."

"They are certainly," smiled the hermit, "more peaceful companions."

"Well," said Leopold, "I'll go on my way. I am bound for Vienna."

"Vienna is no doubt a beautiful city—I was there once in my youth."

"Whether it is beautiful or not, I don't know," said Leo-

pold. "I see very little of it. I spend my time in one vast house surrounded by dull and tiresome people who plague me to do this and that, things that I detest doing, things that I don't even wish to hear of."

"I don't know how I can help you."

"I thought," sighed the young man, "that you might tell me the secret of peace."

"How can I tell you that? It's like talking to a general who wants to know how to set various troops in order. If you have not the power of authority, no one can give it to you. If you can't command your own soul, how can I give you enlightenment how to do so?"

"Do you think," asked Leopold, desperately, "if I were to live as you live here, retired to some cave, some grotto overlooking the Danube, with a couple of goats and my fruit trees and my little bit of garden—live here, I could forget?"

"Forget what?"

"Forget my own weakness."

"No, because that very weakness would drive you back into the world, and you would fret and fume here as much as you do in a palace—"

"How do you know that I have anything to do with palaces?" demanded Leopold.

"I don't know," replied the hermit, "but I guessed; you have a strange air that does not fit into any occupation that I know of. I put you down as one who does live in—well, grand houses, one who has always been waited on, pampered, flattered, spoiled, eh? Why is Vienna so particularly detestable to you? Why do you go there? There are other places even in Austria. Though I hear that everywhere there is tumult and war, there must be a corner of the earth for a young man like you, comely enough and I suppose rich enough to find a little pleasure."

"To find pleasure," said Leopold, "is not exactly what I wish."

"What do you exactly wish?" asked the hermit. "Though, of course, that is a foolish question. No man knows his own mind."

"I know mine," answered Leopold at once. "I wish to be noble; I wish to act with grandeur."

"That," said the hermit, "is not a very likely thing for you to accomplish. I don't read you as one likely to be either grand or noble. Still, who knows? You are very young."

"I am not," remarked Leopold, "perhaps so young as you think. It seems to me that I have lived a hundred years and every one of them boring."

He felt infinitely lonely and forlorn; there was no help to be got here; he stared at the hermit with a sense of hostility; the man's face looked sinister, mocking, imbecile as one of his own goats or that statue of Pan under which Christian had lounged.

It now seemed impossible to him that he could face again Hensdorff, or Prince Christian, whose services he had bought at such a terrible price—the price of his own character—his own soul. He had committed before many actions which seemed even to himself weak and foolish; but never before had he committed such an action as that in which he had abandoned Princess Eleanora to Christian.

He could not defend himself, nor explain himself; he viewed the events of the last few days with complete misery: misery which seemed to him degrading. But he had not even the strength left to turn aside, to abandon everything and remain with this man even for a few days in this lonely place. He was afraid of Hensdorff finding him, afraid of Father St. Nikola coming down from M \ddot{o} lk to argue with him; afraid of the whole pack of them on his trail, hunting and hounding him. He would rather go to Vienna and face them than that they should follow him, track him down, round him up, bear him away—for he was utterly unable to resist them.

"Did you ever," he cried, "hear a more grotesque title than that of Cæsar Augustus?"

"I suppose," remarked the hermit, "it is founded on truth, and one day meant something."

"To-day," said Leopold, "it means nothing." And he

asked, miserably: "Don't you think we've got to the end of things? Do you think that things can really go on any further? Everything seems to me stale—worse than stale, rotten, done for, corrupt, falling to pieces with decay."

"What do you mean by 'everything'?" asked the hermit cautiously.

"I mean the world, our civilization—corrupt, rotten!"

"You don't think," mused the hermit, "that there is anything more to come—that we can go any further—that good, perhaps, is coming out of all this evil, new life out of the rotting ground?"

"New life?" cried Leopold. "I don't. I think that everything is done for, finished. I see no hope in any direction, anywhere—"

The hermit said he was not talking about a resurrection, but of something new coming from something old. What it was, he declared, it was impossible to see, but surely something out of corruption, a new life. . . .

Leopold saw nothing of this. He saw everything round him as he had said: decayed, stinking.

"You must have been very unfairly treated," smiled the hermit, "to have come to this conclusion so soon in your career. You bother and disturb me, sitting there looking so gloomy, with your pale face and downcast eyes. I wish you'd go on your way and leave me to myself."

"You are not, then, sufficient of a philosopher," said Leopold with some irony, "to contemplate the misery of another with equanimity?"

"I have no philosophy at all," remarked the hermit. "I am merely getting through life somehow—as best I can, I suppose."

Leopold rose. He found no more consolation here than he had found with the Jesuits or with the monks, with Hensdorff or with Christian. All the whole world seemed to have become distorted, he remarked—even the landscape, which was stale, tawdry, ugly, brutal.

"I believe I could have been saved from all this," he remarked, "but I threw my chance away. Yesterday in a

wood I saw something that seemed as if it were going to save me."

"Well?" asked the hermit, waiting.

"I hadn't the courage to follow it up. I hadn't the courage to take it."

"Perhaps it would not have helped you had you done so. Very often these are delusions—these supposed chances."

"This was no deception," declared Leopold. "If I had been left alone, and if I had had the strength to do what I wanted to do: if I had followed her—"

The hermit pounced on the word.

"Her! It's a woman, then, at the bottom of it all? Just a commonplace love affair!"

"No," cried Leopold, violently, "no! I don't love any one or anything; there's no love affair in this. I am thinking of myself—of my own character—what happened to me; what I lost yesterday and shall never get again."

He drew his cloak round him and walked rapidly away down the ravine, following the path made by the hermit in his comings to and fro.

He felt now that this fantastic conversation had proved a further act of folly on his part; no good had been gained by it—in fact, only further confusion. There was no way out for him. If he could not face breaking away from life, he must face life, or—

He paused on the crazy little wooden bridge which had been built by the monks over the ravine, and looked down into the bubbling floods below. He would really have liked to end everything that way, but a certain cowardice held him back. He had been brave enough in battle on several occasions, but he could not face the sudden plunge into the black waters which foamed beneath the bridge. Sighing, he thought of Eleanora; he thought of her with tenderness and sentiment. He believed, if he preserved his own life, he might be useful to her one of these ugly days. He might be able to be of some service to her, secretly, just as in the same way he might be able to be of some disservice to Christian, also secretly. What had Hensdorff

hinted? When he had done with the mercenary soldier he might be revenged on him, in the same way that Ferdinand of Styria had been revenged on Wallenstein.

This was a cruel thought from which the fastidious mind of Leopold shrank; yet it came again and again, and he almost encouraged it. Yes, it was the sole pleasure that for the moment he knew: the thought that one day he might be revenged on Christian. Revenge! That was a very stupid and childish word! Yet he liked to turn it over and over. It would be pleasant if one day he could make a mock of Christian, see him down beneath him, be able to show him mercy or compassion, or hardness or justice, just as he chose! How scornful, how insolent Christian had been! How he had flouted him, sneered at him, humiliated him! And worse than that: how he had most violently got him into a corner and pinned him down to a mean, despicable action!

Leopold, staring at the dark water below and the dark rocks above, the bright, pale sky high above the precipice, thought that he would like to live, not so much in the thought of proving one day of service to Eleanora, but in avenging himself—yes, he could think of no other word than revenge—on Christian.

Well he knew the hurt of hatred; well he knew that he, and not Christian, would be hurt by this passionate loathing. But he could not control it, much less cast it off. He could not help indulging the hope that one day he might see that dark, beautiful face flushed with shame or rage, see that erect, dandified figure bent in misery or pain, see the superb, insolent, arrogant base-born adventurer completely and absolutely at his mercy—the mercy of Imperial Cæsar.

He brooded over these hot thoughts as he returned to the inn. After all, Hensdorff was confident that Christian would put him on the Imperial throne and make him Emperor indeed. Hensdorff was shrewd enough; he might be right.

Emperor! Cæsar! Well, that would mean some power—even in these days—the most splendid of pretensions yet—

Meanwhile, Eleanora must suffer, as he had no doubt

she had already suffered—and the thought of this suffering was unbearable. There was his sister, too: another forsaken woman on his conscience; he had to tell her how Christian had rejected her hand. She would not take that easily, he knew: proud and sensitive, as he was proud and sensitive; weak and foolish as he was weak and foolish. She would ill be able to endure the atrocious slight.

Well, he had paid Christian his price; there was always that to remember. Now he would have what he had paid for: no doubt the man was a great general; if he was able to hold back the Allies now sweeping across the Empire, Leopold might indeed be Emperor at last. And once he was Emperor he would be able to adjust these things, the affairs of Eleanora, the affairs of his sister, the affairs of Christian himself; he might, he brooded, even be avenged on all of them—even on Father St. Nikola, who, he felt, had betrayed him; even on Hensdorff, who, he *knew*, had betrayed him; even on that miserable weakling, Anhalt-Dessau, the old ruffian! He thought with desperate irritation of all these people. No one had stood by him—no one had tried to strengthen him. They had all been against him, in a conspiracy against him and his honour. Well, perhaps one day he might be able to form a conspiracy against them! For he would have power when he had conquered the Allies, when he was Emperor, and Christian had been paid. . . .

"I," mused Leopold, half aloud, "when I am Emperor, will have no more pity on them than they will have pity on me! They have no pity on my weakness and folly: I will have no pity on their greed and their treachery."

He returned to the inn, fetched his horse, and turned reluctantly towards his ostentatious capital. Slower and slower he rode; everything oppressed him—even the magnificence of the scenery and the brightness of the sunshine.

He lost the sense of his own identity—felt as one of the meanest of those who, Hensdorff declared, were his subjects; felt fellowship with the wretched peasantry whom he saw by the roadside, working in the fields heavy with the harvest, or wandering by the river banks.

He slept that night in another poor inn, and with the dawn was on the road again. Linger as he would, he must at last see the towers of Vienna in the distance, rising golden and glorious in the suffuse and glowing evening light.

How alien and hateful the city was to him! How he wished he were returning to the pleasant squares and noble streets of Munich, on his native plain of Bavaria.

He cursed the remote and hateful connection with the Hapsburgs, which had given him the dangerous destiny of honour to which he was so unsuited. A man like Christian should have worn the diadem . . . There was the type needed, there was the hard cruelty, the cold arrogance of one who should assume the dictatorship of mankind.

Leopold muffled his cloak round his shoulders and pulled down his hat, fearful lest one of the now more frequent passers-by should recognize him for what he was—the Emperor.

He enjoyed a vague and elusive popularity in Vienna. A gay and light-hearted people did homage to his charm and his youth and sincerity. But he was now in no mood for popular acclamation. The nearer he approached to the gates, the more he began nervously to worry over his meeting with his sister and the Countess Carola. On the one he had to inflict a disappointment, and on the other a slight, for he did not intend to renew any intimacy with the woman for whom he had so long indulged in a sentimental friendship.

That glimpse of Eleanora had made him loathe the image of the Countess Carola. He was, too, shudderingly sensitive on the subject of his sister; hateful as it had been to offer her to Christian, how much more hateful to have to tell her that she had been refused. She would, no doubt, be relieved by her escape, but she would detest the manner of her escape.

He was fond of his sister; he wished to protect her, yet, because she was like himself, she irritated him: she had the same faults, the same failings, the same weaknesses, the same facile charm and delicate grace. Looking at her he

felt as if he were looking into a mirror. He wished she had been different: to correct her was to correct himself, to chide her was to chide himself.

He passed into the crowded streets, where the people went cheerfully to and fro beneath the florid palaces as if there were no such things as war or politics.

No one recognized him. Indeed, he looked travel-stained and weary enough, and his notable face was hidden.

"If I had never returned from this secret journey," he thought, bitterly, "what would they have done? Found another puppet, I suppose! At least I can hardly believe that I would have been missed!"

But he had returned. He had not had the strength to stay away. His impressionable nature seemed to receive a stimulus from the gaiety of the beautiful town. The images of Eleanora and Christian seemed to fade away under the influence of gay and opulent streets—the traffic of coaches, people on horse and foot.

He rode slowly and unobserved past the arid stiff magnificence of his own overpowering palace, the Hofburg, and into the Court of Honour—blank and bleak beneath the blank, bleak façade.

The lackeys lounging in the great doorway were the first to recognize him; the Imperial Hussars had failed to do so. He put them aside impatiently and went direct to his own apartments through tedious, glittering corridors. He was weary, and had a headache; his limbs were fatigued by three days' riding.

After hastily and carelessly adjusting his toilet in the alien, pompous room, he sent for the Archduchess, as the Princess Maria Luisa was named since her father's brief and precarious elevation.

This agitated, expectant lady came at once, with a pale face and a look of alarm, which further vexed the despondent Leopold. They embraced each other with nervous and timid affection.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, hysterically, "how delighted I am to have you back! How long it has seemed since you have

been away! Was it any use? Have you had any success? It is so dull here!"

"Success!" he echoed, bitterly. "Well, I don't know; I've struck a bargain with Christian of Kurland, as he calls himself."

"A bargain?" she repeated, timidly, biting her full lip.

"Yes; but you are out of that pact."

The words sounded brutal. He wished he could recall them; but how else put the matter?

She flushed hotly—she had his defect of easy blushing—and said:

"What do you mean, Leopold? This is grossly put."

"I mean I have been able to spare you. It is another woman's sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" replied Maria Luisa, bewildered. "Who has been sacrificed?"

Leopold could not mention the name of the Princess Eleanora. He replied impatiently, and with a touch of temper:

"It does not matter to you; the bargain has been made. Prince Christian is going to command my armies. It was Hensdorff's affair, not mine. You must ask him for the tale."

"The tale, what do you mean, Leopold?" she asked, blushing hesitantly and nervously. "Did you go to Prince Christian with an offer of my hand?" she added with faltering insistence.

"I was able," replied Leopold, "to spare you; at least we have not come to that degradation. Prince Christian will take charge of my armies without the price of your hand."

Maria Luisa turned away abruptly; she appeared extremely disturbed.

"Oh!" she murmured. "And you, and your marriage?"

Leopold laughed, almost hysterically.

"I and my marriage!" he cried. "Well, I did not come to that, either."

"You mean," asked his sister, "that nothing has been ar-

ranged? What was the sense, then, of your visit to Anhalt-Dessau?"

"There was no sense," sneered Leopold. "There's no sense in any of us. We're just whirled along, like leaves in a wind. *Sense?* What do you expect sense for, from me, my dear sister?"

She looked at him apprehensively, with, he thought, temper and fear; and he resented this though he knew she had been badly treated.

"You'd better ask Hensdorff that," he replied in vexation. "I can't talk now; I've been riding all day, and my head aches. I'm exhausted."

"I, too, am exhausted. The tension here has been intolerable; the situation impossible. I wish we had remained in Munich, and not undertaken any of this!"

"Don't voice my own weakness!" he cried, in yet deeper vexation. "That, too, is what I wish. But what is the use of it? Here we are, and we haven't the strength to get out; therefore we've got to find the strength to go on."

"Where's Hensdorff?" she asked, lost and bewildered.

"Where's Hensdorff? Hensdorff is coming; and, as I say, you'd better ask him all about these things—about Eleonora, about Christian, about our marriages, about everything. I believed he had found a wife for me and a husband for you. Ask him!"

"You're overwrought," murmured the Archduchess. "Something has gone wrong!"

He did not deny this.

"It has been dreadful here," she went on, trembling. "Dreadful. I haven't known where to turn or what to do."

He frowned, with pity for her and contempt for himself, and compassion for both of them.

"Christian will save us, no doubt," he exclaimed. "We must both rely on Christian, this Kurland upstart."

She winced before the bitterness of this sneer; she was altogether dismayed, undone, frightened.

"How will you have any hold over Christian?" she asked him, on a half sob.

Leopold took a desperate turn or two about the splendid, over-furnished long and lofty *salon*.

"Because he has been paid!" he cried with violence. "I've paid him all he asked. A fine price, too."

"What price?" asked Maria Luisa, still more startled. "What price have you paid him?"

She spoke in a low, agitated voice, but it echoed horribly in the veering heart of Leopold. The question made him aghast; it was one he could not answer; in his own dismay he felt a random impulse of pity for his sister, standing there so childlike and distressed in her tight-laced heavy gown and ponderous headdress. He put his arm round her slender shoulders, and looked at her affectionately with wrinkled brows above his blue eyes. She clung to him immediately with an instant response to his affectionate caress; they stood close together in this magnificent void as if for protection against the assaults of destiny; they stared into the vast mirror in front of them, reflecting so many other mirrors, so many tall doors—reflections and exits encircled them; and in each of those long, pale faces, with those Imperial features showing in the glass like drowned shadows in a lake, was apprehension leaping into alarm.

TWELVE

COUNT MICHAEL HENSdorFF'S ally, Lieutenant Gabor, had watched with delight the hasty departure of Leopold. From an upper window his ashy, sunk eyes, cunning in his lean, swarthy face, had watched the Emperor ride away in discomfiture.

The defeat of Leopold and the triumph of Christian were in every way to the Transylvanian's satisfaction. The scheme had been of his own suggesting and of his own promoting, and he stood to gain greatly from it. He had served General Crack for several years, at great advantage to himself, but most reluctantly, for he disliked Christian, and he was quite aware that Christian despised him.

This was the first time that he had observed any weakness in his master. That implacable face and erect figure had never before given any sign whatever of any emotion, either of exaltation after a victory or of discomfiture after defeat, in the presence of his jackal.

Ferdinand Gabor had watched him closely—spied upon him—hoping to discover in him some trace of feebleness, some trace of emotion by which he could get a mastery over him. Such faults as Christian possessed were not those that Gabor could profit by; arrogance and vanity were impervious alike to flattery and servility. Now, under his superb mask of superhuman indifference to mundane affairs, he had betrayed a very considerable weakness, a stupid infatuation for a silly little girl in whom Gabor could see nothing but mere voluptuous charm, and Gabor had been quick to seize the chance.

He had intrigued with Hensdorff on the subject; he had played for Christian and had snared him; he had made him buy, at a quite ridiculous price, this useless ordinary creature. Marriage, and service to Leopold! Christian had actually

paid that monstrous price—monstrous for such a man to pay for a woman like Eleanora. Gabor had often seen him pass slightly by brighter and more resplendent beauties. Now, leaning out of the ornate window, he jeered to himself about Christian and about Leopold.

“That cock crew very loud, and flew away at the first clap of hands!” he muttered to himself. “Well, we’ll see whether even General Crack can make a Cæsar of that popinjay!”

But, if he could do so it would no doubt be a very fine thing, both for Christian and all his hangers-on. Gabor was pleased that he had been allowed to remain behind at Dürsheim, while Banning and Pons had returned with the Uhlans to Ottenheim. He saw in this a chance to ingratiate himself as the main favourite of his master. He wondered whether it would be wise to reveal to him that he had been at the bottom of the intrigue whereby Hensdorff had been induced to offer him the hand of the Princess Eleanora; one never knew. . . .

He had spied on the girl standing on the balcony below, and had heard her poignant exclamation as Leopold rode away. He had seen her stretch out her hands, with her muslin gown fluttering in the breeze and the sunshine, billowing against the curved gilt rails of the balustrade.

He was very much amused to think that possibly she had conceived a romantic fancy for the blond young man with his mournful, romantic air. That really did add a peculiarly piquant spice to the whole affair; not only he was diverted, but he hoped to make his own considerable count in that; he knew he was clever, and he believed he was fascinating to women. Although there were several illegitimate alliances in his pedigree, he was, he reflected with a sneer, at least as well born as Christian, for all his magnificent and unsurpassed airs of majesty. He relished the thought that, in a way, the arranging of this match had put Christian in his power; he had a hold on him, both because he had helped in bringing the marriage about, and because he knew of this extraordinary infatuation for Eleanora; this schoolgirl already languishing for another man!

He leaned down and peered at her as she stood below; disconsolate: yes, he was sure that was the word to express her attitude; she was disconsolate—gazing across the empty courtyard, wondering why Leopold had run away—scared away, mocked Gabor in his narrow heart, poor miserable coward!

The disputed maiden was certainly of a plump and seductive type, with voluptuous arms and shoulders like a piece of Nymphenburg porcelain, and in delicate contrast an engaging air of girlish innocence. To those whose taste really leant in that direction she was no doubt delicious, but Gabor could not see any quality in her which justified the undoubted passion which Prince Christian entertained for her; a passion that made Gabor think the less of his master, whom he had reluctantly admired for being quite impervious to any human weakness. Prince Christian might, he had believed, have done anything for power, for towns, for territory, for money, for crowns; but he would not have believed he would have done anything for a girl—especially for a girl like this one standing below him in the bright sunshine of the summer morning: just an ordinary, young and foolish girl, who would probably be too plump quite soon.

Gabor preferred the dark, flashing, sophisticated charmers with whom Christian had been wont to amuse his brief leisure—even the savage Russian who had an empire as her dowry.

The Château at Dürsheim was very silent. Hensdorff, Christian and Anhalt-Dessau were closeted together. There was considerable agitation and confusion on the part of two of them, at least, Gabor knew; Hensdorff would have to play with a high, firm hand, and must be wondering if, even so, he could bring the business off; Anhalt-Dessau would be irritated, rather desperate, his back against the wall, wondering what it all meant. General Crack would be sitting there as usual, with his sleek and dandified air, rather like—and Gabor pictured the same image as Leopold had pictured—a glossy, neat beast of prey, waiting for his victim: quite sure of his victim, too. It would not be

very easy for Hensdorff, for all his experience and astuteness, to persuade Anhalt-Dessau immediately into this change of bridegrooms: not easy to make him relinquish the Emperor and accept the mercenary; he would have to be frightened, overawed, no doubt. That would be rather a difficult matter, even for Hensdorff.

Ferdinand Gabor wished he could have been present at the scene, which would be, no doubt, most interesting and instructive, and certainly lively; but since this was impossible, he began to prowling lightly round the Château, hesitating behind doors, peeping through windows, peering down corridors. He had no difficulty in discovering the room where Christian, Anhalt-Dessau and Hensdorff were closeted, for there was a page outside who warned him away, saying that his master was engaged on the most important and pressing business, and could by no means be disturbed.

Gabor turned off with a leer, but not before he had heard voices coming from behind that closed door: the voice of Hensdorff, raucous, menacing; the voice of Anhalt-Dessau, scared, worried and resentful. General Crack's silence was, of course, ominous: he was silent because he was quite sure of himself.

Gabor wandered away and asked a valet, "Where is the Duchess?" She also, it seemed, had retired, discomfited and in disarray; retreating to her chamber as to a citadel. The whole household seemed in disorder and confusion; the sudden departure of Leopold had startled every one; there was a sense of great affairs being about to happen—great affairs of not a very pleasant order.

Ferdinand Gabor, mischievous, restless, idle, lingered a while in the house, then went out into the Court of Honour, then into the villa garden. And there he was surprised and delighted to see the coveted Eleanora, walking uncertainly under the shade of the high, clipped hornbeam hedges. He followed her, but at a careful distance; he did not wish to frighten her, and he thought, with a sneer, that she was very likely most easily frightened, silly little puss! It was an odd and pleasing chance that had left her alone—

the confusion of the household, no doubt, was responsible for her escape, without even the inevitable company of the good Baroness Charlotte.

Ferdinand Gabor thought this was an opportunity of which he must not fail to take advantage; it would be both amusing, agreeable and useful for him to make friends with the future wife of his master. It would be quite easy to impress, and even to lead, a little thing like that; and if he could influence the woman who influenced Christian, why, there would be no limit to his power! With Christian ruling the Empire, and he ruling Christian through his wife—a very glittering vision flashed through the tawdry brain of Gabor.

And why not? He believed that he was just as engaging as his master, and more adroit with women; surely, too, he had more experience, for he knew from his own observation that Christian had never continued any connection with any woman long enough to know much about them. He had been too indifferent in his love affairs, thought Gabor, to be able to manage one of the most difficult type—a little silly, ignorant, scared girl with her head full of romantic follies.

Eleanora turned hesitatingly across the garden towards the beech woods. She had an air of escaping from all of them. Once or twice she glanced behind, but Gabor was swift enough to step behind the hornbeam hedges and the elaborate statues that edged the avenue from the Château to the forest; this sort of pursuit was his *métier*.

The girl exactly retraced her steps of yesterday and came out into the beech shade where Leopold had met her, and sat down under the same tree where that young man had first seen her with her wild strawberries.

The light was different now. It had less of magic; the morning sun had not penetrated the fastnesses of the foliage as the evening light had penetrated them yesterday. All was shadowed although fragrant with the rich and luscious fragrance of August.

Gabor, lightly tripping into this shade, spied Eleanora

from a distance, though she did not perceive him, for she seemed deep in a pensive mood, leaning against the silver trunk of the robust tree and looking down at the ground. He tiptoed elegantly through the wood, prepared his most gracious smile and manner, bowing low and doffing his cockaded tricorne, and addressed her with courteous freedom and airy graceful assurance.

"Good morning, Madame," he greeted her; "good morning, Princess. I am your father's guest."

She stared up, bewildered and flushed, not knowing at all what to make of him; not liking him. She drew further away from him behind the tree, so that she just looked at him round the shining trunk, like a frightened faun, curious, but ready to fly.

Ferdinand Gabor was attractive and of good address. He carried himself with an air of one used to courts and wore the Uhlan uniform trimly—an aristocrat clearly labelled, yet sinister in his mocking affectations.

"I saw you last night, I think," returned Eleanora. "I do not know who *is* my father's guest, or who all these people are staying at Dürsheim."

"I think," smiled Gabor, "that you will know; in fact there are a great many things just about to be revealed, Princess. A great many very interesting things. Perhaps you would care to take my arm, and we could walk a little through the woods and I could discover to you what these matters will be."

"I must return to the Château," said Eleanora, who had never been so boldly addressed by a man. "I really have no right to be here. I just wandered a little way to be alone. My father is shut up with Prince Christian and Count Hensdorff. I do not know what they do, what they talk about; but I think it is something very important, and they all seem very agitated. My father said he wanted to speak to me presently. I, too, feel agitated, and so I have come out here to be away from it all, because—"

All this was pantingly delivered in childlike awkwardness.

"Because you have recently been in this spot before?"

asked Gabor, quickly. "Because you remember something very agreeable that happened here, under, perhaps, this very tree?"

This was only a shot in the dark, but she winced and hung her head, humiliated, and feeling she had been spied upon. Her fright gave him an immense advantage.

"Where is the Duchess?" he smiled. "Is she, too, one with the confusion that seems to reign at Dürsheim?"

"I don't know," protested Eleanora, piteously on her guard, "I don't know; you really mustn't ask me. Please go away."

"But I," persisted Gabor, with his most insinuating air, "could tell you so much that you would be very glad to know. It seems to me you've been left in complete ignorance about a great number of things which intimately concern yourself, have you not, Princess?"

"That may be so," replied the girl with some spirit; "but surely it is for my father to enlighten me, and not for you, Monsieur."

"That young man," smiled Gabor, unmoved, "who left so suddenly just now: do you by any chance know who he is?"

"He is Captain Leopold," said Eleanora, with a flush. "He's gone away; he seems in trouble. I think," she added, timidly, "that he will come back."

"Well," said her tormentor, "I daresay you'll see him again, if that's what you mean; but as for his coming back to Dürsheim, I rather doubt it, I must confess." He came a step nearer, and asked slyly: "Do you wish to see Captain Leopold again, Princess?"

At this the distracted maiden fell into a deeper reserve and bewilderment, and drew back with palpable alarm.

"I am going now," she pleaded. "I am returning to the Château; please don't importune me any more. I must not discuss these things, they are not for me. I must leave them to my father. Captain Leopold is a young soldier, I suppose. There is no more to be said."

"There is a great deal more to be said," returned Gabor. "Shall I—would you like me to tell you? Why not? We

are all alone in the woods. There is no one spying here. You haven't got your grandmother to correct you, or your father to chide you. Come, Princess, you must grow up, you know! You can't live in a fairy tale."

This cynical remark sounded hateful to Eleanora, who had heard so often the same sort of rebuke from her father. She had always resented it from him, and resented it still more from this stranger, whose aspect she detested and whose words she distrusted, who stood there so inflexible and covertly insolent.

"I don't want to live in a fairy tale," she answered, with what pride she could muster. "I am perfectly happy in my own life."

She shivered, thinking that he seemed to impersonate something horrible, stalking after her in the lonely woods—woods that had been so enchanting and so delicious yesterday, and now seemed submerged in hideous shadow, in some way changed and hateful, very different from their ancient gloom and splendour.

But Gabor persisted in his unwelcome attentions. He was a very self-confident man. He had always dealt with women who appreciated his cynical, chill addresses. He did not believe that he would be long in impressing this simple young girl; he wanted to gain her confidence, to make her believe he was her friend; he knew that she would be very dismayed and alone in her new life, and in that dismay, and perhaps terror, he would like her to turn to him, to consider him as a help and as a support. That would be most agreeable and most convenient to Prince Gabor.

He did not, therefore, feel inclined to relinquish this opportunity of occupying her mind and impressing his image on her memory and assuring her of his good offices and his friendship; he knew that he was going rather far in his advances, but he could not resist her foolishness, her inexperience; she was too easy a prey to be relinquished lightly, and more lovely than he had thought. He began to endorse Prince Christian's taste.

"Your father," he smiled, with what he meant to be a

charming smile, "is arranging your marriage, now, this very minute; presently he will call you, send for you into his cabinet to tell you so. I think you should be obliged to me, Princess. I warn you of this in advance, so that you may put a good face on the matter. At least your cue is a decent resignation."

He tried to give this a jesting sound, and yet his ashy eyes looked at her as if he did not mean her to take it as a jest.

"My marriage?" said the girl, faintly, nervously clasping her hands. "Oh, yes, perhaps. I suppose so! I don't know why *you* should tell me of it—my father will do so. My marriage to—"

"Your marriage to General Crack," said Gabor, briefly, with an insulting intonation on the name.

"Oh, no," cried Eleanora. "Oh, no! I think you are wrong!"

He relished her deep distress.

"Will you please let me pass now? I want to go back to the Château," she implored.

"Not," said Gabor, "in this disarray and confusion! Compose yourself, my dear Princess! Behave like a lady of sense, and listen to what I have to say. It certainly *is* your marriage with General Crack that your father is at this moment arranging—and a very fine marriage, too, I've no doubt people would say. He is, I suppose," added the Transylvanian, with a sneer, "the greatest man of his time. He will, very likely, be greater still. Nay, he may even stand on the steps of the Imperial throne! Who knows? He may even sit on the Imperial throne itself! They say he can hold the Empire together or pull it asunder as he wishes."

Eleanora did not know what all this meant. She looked bewildered, almost like a child about to cry; and plucked at her muslins vaguely.

"Come!" urged Gabor, with an air of encouragement, "prepare yourself for the splendid part you are about to play. Think what the future holds for you as this great

man's wife! Have I not told you what you may expect—perhaps the Imperial Diadem itself!"

She heard the obvious crude sneer in these words and was affronted, hurt and frightened. She could not understand what this swarthy, evil-looking man with the ash-coloured eyes meant. She began to hurry away through the trees, but he followed her, lightly and adroitly, picking a path over last year's leaves and through the brambles.

"Don't you want to marry Prince Christian?" he urged. "Don't you think he is a very pleasant gentleman—a very notable and famous general—a wonderful husband for any girl who is fortunate enough to captivate him?"

The poor child paused to listen, fascinated and repelled.

"Or perhaps," continued Gabor, enjoying his advantage, "you think him hateful, implacable, hard, cruel . . . well, perhaps that is true. Perhaps even you have heard certain tales—but I suppose not, no—not yet. But I am afraid, my dear Princess, whether you like it or no you will have to make the best of it, for at any moment you will be summoned to the house and be introduced to him as your husband. Come, I am his intimate friend and confidant, and I should like to be *your* friend, too. Won't you rely on me? Perhaps I may be able to help you if you are in any difficulty or trouble."

He had brought his dark presence close to Eleanora, and stood so, smiling, and mockingly barring her way.

"I know Prince Christian rather better than you ever will," he added.

"Please," she replied, struggling for self-control in vain, "I don't want to hear any of it. I don't need a friend, I'm sure. There's the Duchess and my father—that's quite enough. I have friends, too, at home in Anhalt-Dessau. Please!" And she tried to avoid him; and did succeed in passing him and in reaching again the shelter of the high hornbeam hedges.

Gabor allowed her to escape down those narrow paths, but he followed her, knowing she was his prisoner here, and walked beside her shut in by that high wall of clipped

leaves, talking, insinuating, trying to ingratiate himself with her, half servile, half impertinent, encouraged more and more in his persistency by her obvious distaste, terror and disgust. He was resolved that, if he could not ingratiate himself with the girl, at least he would terrorize her; Christian's future wife was too obvious and tempting a victim, too easy a morsel, for one like Gabor to leave unattempted. Surely he, with all his adroitness in all manner of complicated intrigues, was not going to be bested by this stupid young girl?

But all his arts only served to increase the bewildered terror of Eleanora. She hurried, trying to get out of the hornbeam walk, out of the shadow, out of the company of this man. She almost ran, but he was still beside her, talking rapidly, using all his powers of persuasion and argument to make her believe in him, to trust in him, to favour him. What pleasure there was in this gross pursuit of his master's treasure!

In her misdirected flight she had involved herself in a quidnunc, where the tall sharp cut blocks of hornbeam shut her out from the Château and forced her to retrace her frightened steps and brought her face to face with her odious pursuer near a stucco fountain crested with stone lilies and circled by a sedate parterre starred with living lilies; here she pantingly hesitated, not knowing which way to fly, and looking seductive enough to the cold eyes that surveyed her—more than ever a Nymphenburg shepherdess, dishevelled with her flight from a swain too importunate!

Gabor took her wrist, and then her waist—both so small and tempting, and asked her, enjoying her mute horror, why she was so frightened?

Then he stooped, plucked a cluster of the lily buds and tried to place this nosegay in her bosom.

"Do not go unadorned to your lord!" he smiled, and endeavoured to fasten the innocent flowers into the heaving ruffles on that innocent breast.

She twisted away with more dexterity than he would have credited her with, and the flowers fell beneath them onto

the lip of the basin. Gabor was about to snatch at her again, for he had given full rein to his malice, when his flickering glance saw Christian coming through the narrow opening in the hornbeam hedge. Gabor, adept at control, bowed to Eleanora in the most formal manner and begged to take leave of her since His Highness had so opportunely arrived. He did not have time to finish this sentence, for Christian, glancing from him to the girl cowering with her fingers to her lips, demanded, "Your business in the company of the Princess?"

These words, spoken with the utmost insolence, were more than Gabor's discretion could withstand; he permitted himself a swagger as he replied that he was escorting the lady for a stroll in the woods.

Christian glanced from him to the knot of flowers dripping beneath the jet of water and then to the distressed girl who had no wit or judgment with which to deal with this, to her, most terrifying situation.

"What are these flowers?" he asked quietly.

Eleanora put her fingers before her face.

"Monsieur was trying to give them to me," she whispered.

"Pick them up!" Christian commanded Gabor. The Transylvanian hesitated, for Christian spoke as if he were ordering a cur to a kennel, but his habit of obedience was too strong; he stooped easily, and negligently handed the lilies to the other man, remarking slyly:

"Forgive me, Highness, I had not understood that my poor gallantries were unwelcome."

One step brought Christian close to him, one second sufficed for him to dash the wet lily bells into his face; even as Gabor shrank back he noted with gratified malice how Christian had at length lost the languid indifference, the serene calm he had so painfully learnt in France; in gesture, in inflexion he was all Italian as he struck his hand across that grinning mouth and cried:

"Begone! Immediately! If I see you again I will have you thrashed!"

Then he recovered his composure instantly and turned his

back, with unutterable contempt, on Gabor. The Transylvanian had staggered into the hornbeam hedge; the heavy faceted bezel of Christian's ring had cut his lip and blood mingled with water trickled down to his spruce uniform; he pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it to his twisted mouth; his soul quivered one agony of hate, but he dared risk no second insult; he slipped swiftly away through the tall hedges of the quidnunc.

Christian gazed sternly at Eleanora; he was most bitterly amazed and annoyed by this scene, most of all by his own flaunt of rage.

"Why were you alone?" he frowned.

Eleanora was prepared for reproach; she knew that an indecorum on her part had led to all this unpleasantness; it had been wrong for her to slip away like that—if her father was to know!

She wrung her hands in silence and with terrified eyes pleaded for pity.

"Gabor, of all men!" mused Christian in deep rage; it was incredible. "Did he follow you?"

"I don't know," whispered Eleanora, looking ready to sink on her knees before this stern scrutiny. "I met him in the woods, Monseigneur—only a little way in the woods—if—if you would not tell my father—"

"It is no longer your father's business, but mine," he replied curtly, and set his heel on the lilies Gabor had profaned. "Come, I have been asked to bring you to the Château—I have looked for you—some while—in vain."

Eleanora wished to say something to placate him, but knew of nothing; she thought him even more forboding punishment and anger than her father; how horrible his dark face had been in that flash of time when he had struck the other man—a grinning mask of fury!

"This is the first time that we have been alone together," he remarked moodily and with an accent of deep disappointment that she could not understand. "An ill occasion! Mademoiselle," he added sharply, "will you come to the house?"

She walked beside him dutifully between those fragrant high hedges and he took no heed of her, absorbed in the thought of Gabor; the man must be cashiered; the competent scoundrel had been useful, no doubt, extremely useful, and might be difficult to replace; but he had now offended beyond forgiveness; General Crack never retained in his service those who had once offended; and no one had offended as this blackguard had offended.

As Christian and Eleanora went into the Château, Gabor, still wiping his bleeding lip, was staring at them from behind the statue of Silenus, against the florid plinth of which he leant his trembling body.

Ferdinand Gabor had done with Christian, as completely as Christian had done with him. A long-contained, an envious and jealous hatred had now broken into complete and utter loathing and detestation; as he watched the elegant and rigid figure of General Crack, escorting the reluctant girl into the Château, a complete plan of vengeance flashed into his inflamed mind: a scheme of delicate, atrocious vengeance, not too difficult to accomplish; even in his pain and writhing humiliation this thought thrilled him with exquisite jubilation; the passions of these people set them at his mercy. It had long been worth while for him to take a great deal from General Crack for material reasons; it was not now worth while to take this—those words, that blow in front of that silly woman.

Always rapid and direct in action, he left the Château and rode after Leopold towards Vienna; through all that journey the unstaunchable bleeding of his lip kept fresh his determined hate.

THIRTEEN

CHRISTIAN was not aware of the girl's repugnance, of her straining away from him as they walked down the long, cool white corridors of the Château; indeed, he was scarcely conscious of her presence at all. He still was too absorbed by his utter astonishment at the incredible behaviour of Gabor. It seemed to him exactly as if one of his favourite and most cringing spaniels had suddenly flown at his hand and bitten him. For years the Transylvanian had been in his service and had always shown the most servile submission; Christian was deeply infuriated by this sudden presumptuous insolence. That he should have dared in any way to disturb the girl; that he should have ventured to follow Eleanora into the gardens, forced on her his addresses, frightened her, intimidated her, offered her flowers—Christian could scarcely believe this although it had been the evidence of his own eyes and ears. His strong fingers tingled to clench again as if he was a second time about to raise his hand to strike that cringing blackguard.

Gabor had been extremely capable and clever, and might be extremely dangerous. Christian thought of neither of these things; he resolved that the Transylvanian must be instantly, and with the greatest indignity, dismissed his service.

He was therefore so occupied in controlling the anger which these amazing reflections gave him that he did not observe that Eleanora was shrinking from him against the wall, that she was regarding him with very little less dread than the dread with which she had regarded the man from whom he had rescued her, the insolent jackal, Gabor. It was, however, with a different manner of dread that Eleanora glanced up at Prince Christian. She was not, she could not be, impervious to the brilliant attraction of his

self-assurance and his self-confidence, of his dramatic good looks, his superb carriage and dandified splendour.

When they reached the door of the room where Hensdorff and Anhalt-Dessau were closeted he turned and spoke to her, suddenly realizing her part in this.

"I was impetuous," he remarked, frowning in some distress, "I should not have struck that rascal—it was not the moment. Perhaps I frightened you. You must put it all out of your mind now. You will never see him again. He shall not trouble you any more."

And she noted and was soothed by the extreme softness of his voice. She did not want to enter the room, she did not want to face the two men whom she knew were there, neither Hensdorff nor her father; she drew away and made as if to run down the corridor, but Christian took and retained her hand gently, at the same time with a certain insistent strength.

"No," he said, "you must not run away, you must come with me to your father, Mademoiselle."

She would not look at him and did not want to listen to him, but he forced her, though very graciously and courteously, through the tall door which he had opened, and she found herself in the small private closet of the Duchess, now occupied by Anhalt-Dessau and Hensdorff. She sensed at once a gloomy and sombre atmosphere, full of agitation and fear. Hensdorff looked grim and sarcastic, biting his lower lip and stroking his long, eloquent and pendulous nose. Anhalt-Dessau appeared flustered, frightened, agitated; he was indeed cornered, and hardly knew what to say or do; he very much resented this exchange of bridegrooms and on every count would have preferred Leopold. But Leopold had fled, Leopold had left him in the lurch, at the mercy of these two men. He was scared, and Hensdorff meant he should be scared, by those fatal despatches from Vienna, the account of the break-up of the conference at Brussels, the march of the Allies across the frontier. Across *his* frontier by now, for all he knew; Hensdorff had said as much. Anhalt-Dessau would be one of the first places to

be fallen on. And to whom could he look to defend his territory? Only to General Crack. How could he secure the services of General Crack? Only by giving him his daughter! Otherwise, that mighty soldier would join, not the forces of Leopold, but those of the Allies. Anhalt-Dessau was severely frightened.

Hensdorff had spoken rapidly and argued swiftly, with a certain dry bitterness and fury. He had also promised great rewards—the Golden Fleece, a Countship of the Holy Roman Empire, the favour of Leopold, the friendship and protection of Christian—"all," he had remarked with irony, "a fair price for your little daughter, Prince Anhalt-Dessau."

And Christian had sat there all the while throughout the degrading interview, serene, implacable; saying a word now and then in his soft voice, but mostly staring out of the window at the beautiful view of the beautiful river. Christian liked the river; he liked the river, that silent power which seemed to have so much of his own nature, better than he liked most men. And at last Anhalt-Dessau had given in: Christian should have his daughter. He had indeed little choice. There was, as he reminded himself bitterly, no other suitor in the field. Leopold had gone. He thought with loathing of Leopold, a weakling and a coward, and he suggested sarcastically to Hensdorff that Christian might have a heavy task in making this weakling puppet really Emperor; a flimsy Cæsar there, he sneered. And Hensdorff had replied drily that it did not matter how flimsy the Cæsar if he had General Crack in his service.

When he looked up with agitated glance to see his daughter entering the room with Prince Christian, the personal aspect of the matter occurred to Anhalt-Dessau for the first time. He wondered stupidly why this successful man was prepared to pay such a stupendous price for Eleanora. It seemed a very extraordinary thing to him that this little girl, as Hensdorff had called her, was worth so much in the eyes of a man like General Crack, and he looked, in the midst of all his dismay, bewilderment and excitement, curiously at his own child, as if trying to discover in her some

charm or attraction which hitherto he had neglected or ignored. But he could see nothing but a blonde, pale, dismayed-looking maiden in a simple muslin dress with a simple straw hat, who seemed as if she wished to run away or cry; and this was indeed exactly what Eleanora did wish.

Anhalt-Dessau made an effort to preserve his dignity and importance before the daughter whom he had so continually bullied. He rose and sternly motioned her to one of the brocade chairs against the wall, and she sat stiffly, alarmed, her eyes downcast, her hands trembling in her lap. Prince Christian remained standing beside her, and smiled from one to the other of the agitated men. He smiled at the girl. Behind that mask of indifference which he had for so long carefully cultivated, and which he could now so successfully preserve, he was still thinking of the incredible insolence of that hound Gabor, and wondering in what most effective way he could punish the audacity of the Transylvanian.

"Eleanora," said Anhalt-Dessau with an effort, "I have been discussing your marriage with these gentlemen, Count Hensdorff and Prince Christian, both of whom are, I think, known to you."

He was making words to cover his own agitation. He went on talking in a rambling sort of way, a preamble to the marriage project, simply because he really did not know what to say. He knew, of course, what he had to say, but could not tell quite in what sentences to clothe the matter of his decision. At length Hensdorff broke in impatiently. Those despatches were in his pocket; there was really no time to waste. He said, brusquely, turning his jaded eyes upon the girl:

"Princess Eleanora, your father is telling you that we have just made a matrimonial contract between you and Prince Christian. I hope this will be pleasing to you as it is to His Highness. It is in every way a favourable contract to yourself."

"Yes, that is what we have decided," added Anhalt-Dessau hastily. "These are times of stress, Eleanora, and there has been no space for long negotiations or delicate

breakings to you of these affairs. They are settled now."

He paused; it was as if he would have added: "And you must make the best of them." Hensdorff caught up the clumsily broken sentence.

"Prince Christian will tell you of the settlements if you wish to know of them," he remarked, "but I expect, Princess, you are used to leave those things to your father. He is satisfied, and therefore we have taken it that you will be so."

Eleanora was further bewildered; she hardly understood the import of what they said. Her eyes wandered idly to the clock. How late it was—nearly midday! What a long time these men had been talking in this close room! What a long time ago it was since Leopold had ridden away! This morning, this very morning early, in the first pure golden sunshine, he had ridden away; and here she was now, sitting here, and they were talking of her marriage to some one else, to this man standing close to her, at whose magnificent presence she hardly dared to glance. More and more she was frightened; she felt her throat dry and her hands cold; tears stinging her eyes. She rose timidly to her feet and made a curtsy to her father and whispered:

"Can I go away now, please? Can I go and find the Duchess? I've rather a headache and I don't feel very well. I'd like to talk to you about these things presently but not now."

"There is no talking to be done," said Hensdorff grimly. "We are finished with the talking, Princess. It was merely to inform you of the fact of your approaching marriage with Prince Christian that we asked you to come here. I really do not think there's anything more to be said."

But Prince Christian bent softly towards her and said in his low voice, with almost simple tenderness:

"There is a great deal more to be said, Eleanora. You and I will say it together presently. There is nothing about which you need trouble now. If you wish to go to the Duchess you may do so. I will myself escort you to her apartment."

But Anhalt-Dessau could not let the interview end like this. He felt that he had cut a miserable figure in his daughter's eyes and must somehow assert his authority and importance.

"I hope you understand, Eleanora," he said sternly. "You mustn't be childish or foolish over this. I've had an idea lately that your head's been filled by fairy tales and dreams and childish things. I'm trying to make an end of all that now. We're at war—yes, war's broken out again, more fiercely than before, I'm afraid. Prince Christian will be in charge of the Imperial troops. He is fighting for Leopold, our Emperor." He could not forbear to sneer. "Yes, our Emperor Leopold. Your husband will crown him, Eleanora, if he is ever crowned."

"But this," murmured Eleanora, "has nothing to do with me. I don't understand."

She had always been kept well outside the affairs of men, and war and politics were but two words to her ignorance.

Prince Anhalt-Dessau interrupted harshly:

"It's absurd to say you don't understand, child. It doesn't matter whether you understand or not, as long as you understand this: you are to marry Prince Christian."

How long since Captain Leopold had ridden away? Centuries surely! She put her hand over her hot eyes and dropped another curtsy.

"Very well, father; of course I shall do exactly as you wish. And now might I go away? I really am tired and I really have a headache."

"She has been frightened," remarked Christian, turning to Anhalt-Dessau with sudden haughtiness. "Why don't you look after her more closely? Where is her lady? She was alone in the garden when I went to find her, and there some abominable wretch frightened her. Monseigneur, you should have seen that this did not happen."

Anhalt-Dessau stammered with rage and humiliation, excusing himself incoherently, talking about the Baroness Charlotte and the Duchess. He did not know how it was that his daughter was alone in the garden. It had never,

he said, happened before. Hensdorff interrupted with harsh and growing impatience.

"All these things are trivialities, Anhalt-Dessau, and I beg Your Highness to keep to the matter in point. Princess Eleanora has been advised of her approaching marriage, and I think we have no more business with the lady. Let us then get to other affairs."

"Will you, then," said Christian in the gentlest tone of command, "take your daughter to the Duchess, Anhalt-Dessau? And will Your Highness then return here to this closet and finish the discussion with me and Hensdorff?"

Anhalt-Dessau bowed, and took his daughter's hand with what dignity he could muster. He had already in a few hours fallen into the habit of obeying Prince Christian.

Eleanora gave yet another timid curtsy to Prince Christian and Hensdorff and left the room, fluttering and half crying, on her father's arm.

"Well," sighed Hensdorff, as the door closed, "finished! I hope Your Highness is satisfied?"

"I am satisfied," replied Christian. "I have got exactly what I asked for on my own terms, haven't I? I hope that you, my dear Count, are equally pleased with your share of our morning's work. Your Emperor has not played the most noble of parts, nor behaved in the most regal of manners; but no doubt he will mend by experience, and learn to put a better front on his vanity and youthfulness."

"It's all very well," protested Hensdorff grimly, "for Your Highness to sneer, but when you quarrel with a man and drive him with his back to the wall, he is not apt to behave very finely."

"I did not know," smiled Christian, "that this marriage was a great matter with His Imperial Majesty. You told me, or rather you told Gabor, my creature, that Leopold would be delighted to relinquish the Princess as the price of my services."

"No matter for that," said Hensdorff keenly. "Since Your Highness is to set him on the Imperial throne it is best that you should know something of his character. He's

a flyaway; difficult and tactless; very nice about his honour, as I believe Your Highness is nice, and he did not care for this bargaining about a woman, especially since he had seen the woman and found her only a simple girl."

Christian frowned down that comment.

"All that is beside the mark," he replied. "That affair is settled. But I would warn you to tell your Emperor to put a better face on things. It is ill, methinks, fighting for a whining boy. It is more ill to dream of putting the Imperial Diadem on the head of a weakling. I have sworn to fight for your man, and I shall fight for him to the best of my ability, but it would give a better flourish to the whole affair if you should tell him to cut a finer figure."

Hensdorff bowed; his heavy face was ironic; his voice mocking.

"Doubtless it is now for Your Highness to give commands and for the Emperor to obey. I shall not fail to remind His Imperial Majesty to make his department worthy of one who commands General Crack."

Christian remained indifferent to the sneer.

"Where has he gone now?"

"Vienna, I presume," said Hensdorff. "Where else should he go?"

"It would have become him better if he had gone towards the frontier. There are many garrison towns there that would be enlivened by his presence," said Christian. "Also, am I to have no orders from him? Is it all left to me?" he added with a smile. "This is a strange master to serve, who flies without giving one single word."

"You," asserted Hensdorff, "would not have taken his commands had he given any."

"No," admitted Christian, "I should not have taken his commands, but it would have given a better colour to the whole affair had he issued them."

With lean, knotted hands Hensdorff gathered up his papers and tied them round with tape; he was weary with vehement talking.

"When does Your Highness mean to take command of the army?"

"The army?" said Christian mockingly. "Have you got one? I thought I had to provide the army before I could take command of it. I must consult Maréchal De Lisle in Prague. I am not too well informed in your affairs, Count Hensdorff. For the last few months Imperial matters have been in a state of flux and reflux. It seems to me that I must make, out of confusion and chaos, some sort of order and strength. Your Leopold will do nothing. The first thing is to clinch our bargain."

"Agreed," said Hensdorff. "Does Your Highness wish to be married at once?"

"Certainly," said Christian. "I do not mistrust either you or Anhalt-Dessau, but the times are full of chances and accidents. Before I leave to take command of Leopold's army I should like to know that Princess Eleanora is my wife and under my protection. That demand, I think, is just."

"Just or no," replied Hensdorff, "it is not for me to decide. You must ask Anhalt-Dessau. I see no objection to your marriage taking place to-night, and your escorting the Princess to your Château immediately. You have adequate means at Ottenheim for her protection, far more adequate than they have here; and, for myself, I can have no objection."

All this seemed oddly trivial to Hensdorff; the affairs of empire appeared petty when they had been the occasion of so much shrewish dispute; yet he admired, and more and more, the man with whom he now spoke.

He was silent for a second, looking on the ground; he had made an excellent bargain, he should have been elated. Then he said curiously:

"And the lady? I suppose Your Highness will have no difficulty there?"

"Difficulty, Monseigneur?" said Christian with a blank look. He then added, in a tone of supreme indifference:

"I had better tell you, Hensdorff, that Gabor has left my service—my Uhlans and my employ. I believe you have been conducting some negotiations with him, negotiations regarding this affair. He was much in my confidence, but that is over now: he has gone, where I don't know, and anything he may say to you about me, or purporting to be from me, is without my authority. Take no notice of it. He is a villain, an insolent villain."

"That I knew," said Hensdorff simply; "but I thought nevertheless that he was well in the favour of Your Highness."

"In my favour?" said Christian. "No. In my employ, yes. I have used him frequently and found him adroit, subtle and clever. He was my agent, as you knew, in Vienna, and employed there other agents. But that, as I say, is over. The man has shown himself presumptuous to an incredible degree, and he is gone. For me he exists no more unless I seek him out to punish him. And I warn you, Hensdorff, to take no heed of anything he says. He may find other work with other men, but never more with me."

Hensdorff was startled and inquisitive. He ventured to ask:

"And how has Gabor so suddenly offended Your Highness? You are not, I think, fastidious or particular where your lesser servants are concerned."

"I am fastidious in some things," replied Christian, "and in one of those things has Gabor offended me. No more of the matter, Hensdorff. I have spoken entirely for your guidance."

There was a pause; the two men seated either side the table looked at each other easily. Hensdorff was exhausted, but he had made a superb bargain—not by trickery, the famous mercenary well understood the value of what he paid; the old minister respected him for his lavish munificence; he no longer regarded him as a tawdry adventurer but saw in him a man with a certain grandeur of soul; Hensdorff could not recall having met this quality before in any one.

Anhalt-Dessau, flustered and agitated, re-entered the room, biting his forefinger and glancing furtively from one man to the other; both of them his masters, he knew; one of them, Hensdorff, his enemy, he was sure. He hated Hensdorff, who had played him up and down, first offering the Emperor, then forcing Prince Christian on him at a moment's notice.

Hensdorff now proceeded to abruptly break the project of an immediate marriage; explained in a few dry words that Christian's presence was required immediately with the armies far away from Dürsheim, and that before he left to take up his arduous command he wished to know that the Princess Eleanora was his wife, and, to use his own words (rather ironically), in his own protection; Anhalt-Dessau was further scared and agitated at this but he could find no good reason to argue for delay. After a little reflection it seemed to him that here was a good chance to shift all responsibility, to end the matter, to have done with it, to have the girl safely in some one else's keeping. Here he was in Dürsheim, a long way from his home, with no soldiers and only a few servants, and it would not be too easy in the present state of affairs to ensure the safety of a couple of women. He did not dare argue against the marriage, but agreed that it should take place that evening in the court chapel of the Château. He would, he promised, at once go and tell the chaplain to make all preparations and also bid his daughter prepare herself.

"She is to leave for Ottenheim to-night, I take it?" he added, in some confusion and bewilderment. "It is all very abrupt to me, Prince Christian, but I acknowledge that the times are difficult and full of confusion."

He looked at the papers in Hensdorff's hands and drew some consolation from them. The settlements had been princely; he had, after all, done very well for his daughter. If it hadn't been for that blot on Christian's birth—but, after all, other men had the same blot and had even risen to wear the Imperial purple. If Christian saved the Empire for Leopold of Bavaria, no one would trouble very much

about the fact that his mother had been an Italian Columbine—no one except Christian himself, perhaps, in his own heart; and who would care about his private pangs? Before the world he would be able to carry it with a high hand; he had enough audacity, enough insolence for any pretension, the Devil knew. Perhaps, Anhalt-Dessau reflected, Leopold would give him Pomerania and Kurland, and he would be able to call himself a reigning Duke, and his daughter would be able to call herself a reigning Duchess. Not quite so splendid perhaps as being the Empress, but then, the weak man argued in his mean soul, if Leopold had fallen she would not anyhow have been Empress. It was a case of making the best of a rather desperate situation.

"And I?" he asked. "What am I to do? Where am I to go?"

"You can come with me," said Christian. "I have a sufficiently powerful escort. The Princess, I shall leave in my Château of Ottenheim. And now, if you please, I must have some time to myself. I have a great number of letters to write and a great many matters to settle. I wish to send one of my Uhlans back to my Château to fetch Banning and Pons. There is a good deal of preparation to be made before my departure to-morrow, a departure that must be as soon as possible. You will please go, Anhalt-Dessau, and apprise your daughter of the ceremony to-night."

His amiable smile and level look dismissed them both; he retired into the inner closet which had been placed at his disposal, where two secretaries waited his dictation.

Hensdorff made ready to return to Vienna, for his business was now to get the ear of Leopold and make him behave in some manner worthy of the enterprise he had undertaken; soothe and spur and encourage him into making some sort of a kingly figure before the assembled thousands who would soon shout for him and fight in his cause. He felt utterly disgusted at Leopold's behaviour, and he had no doubt that Leopold felt equally disgusted with him. These things would have to be passed over. They were pledged now to a certain mutual line of action and must

make the best of it, if Leopold did not feel like an Emperor, he must in some way be induced to assume the appearance of an Emperor.

Hensdorff had appreciated General Crack's advice on that point and agreed with his recommendation. Much as he still resented the arrogance and disliked the presumption of Prince Christian, he wished secretly that the two men could change places, that Christian could be the Emperor and Leopold the hired soldier; then, he remarked to himself, we should have somebody worth fighting for. . . .

Hensdorff reflected too on the case of the Archduchess Maria Luisa. There might be some difficulty there. She had been desperately affronted—more desperately affronted than Leopold. Her hand had been offered and refused. It might not be very easy to make her gracious to Prince Christian, and gracious she certainly must be, or pretend to be, as long as he fought for her brother; as long as her brother leant on him as the man who must place the Imperial crown upon his head.

Hensdorff had plenty of leisure for these reflections, for during the whole hot day he saw none of the other inmates of the Château, neither Anhalt-Dessau nor Christian nor the women; but in the evening, about seven o'clock, he was summoned to the chapel to witness the hasty marriage of Prince Christian and Princess Eleanora, and he went, not unwillingly; he thought that, after all, the ceremony would be rather an amusing one; an ironic comedy.

FOURTEEN

THE Lutheran chapel at Château Schönbuchel was simple in structure but rather gaudily adorned. Angels in bright blue and crude red robes, waved gilt hair, and immense haloes stood with fantastic musical instruments on the top of the gaudy little gold organ. There were other little glittering angels above the altar, and coloured glass in the arched windows. Through this streamed a plenitude of evening sunshine when Hensdorff entered the chapel to be present at the wedding of General Crack.

Count Michael Hensdorff was tired and full of many affairs, which were of the most extreme importance to himself and his master; but he could not forbear being both interested in and amused by the scene at which he was to assist.

Punctually to the appointed hour Prince Christian arrived with Colonel Pons and Captain Banning in attendance. The Lutheran pastor was already in his place. Hensdorff remarked, with mingled vexation and admiration, that the bridegroom maintained that superb calm which had been so long his pose. He was resplendent in the extreme of exotic uniform, that of his own Uhlans, handsome with tassel, scarf and sash, fringed gauntlet and embroidered sword-belt. He wore several stars and orders, including The Golden Fleece, the coveted White Eagle of Poland and the White Eagle of Prussia. Despite the fact that he had been working hard in his closet all day, he was exceedingly dandified in his appearance, as usual freshly powdered, shaved and curled, and might even have appeared, except for his inherent magnificent virility, foppish, so careful had he been with every detail of his gorgeous appearance.

The experienced eye of Hensdorff recognized in him a splendid figure to be a leader of men, a magnificent per-

sonality to guide and inspire armies, a proper prince to symbolize the hopes and glories of a great nation. It was a pity, he reflected sourly, that chance had not put him in the legitimate line of a throne. The Neapolitan actress mother had certainly lent a certain theatricality to his appearance. His very remarkable good looks, Hensdorff reflected, were perhaps scarcely the good looks of a grandee, but these were glossed over by a very finished air of high breeding acquired at the Court of Versailles. Not often did he betray the blot on his birth.

With no less eager curiosity, Hensdorff regarded the Princess Eleanora, who entered on the arm of her father, followed by the Duchess and the Baroness Charlotte. Women of the type of the Princess and the Duchess were a closed book to Hensdorff, an unmarried man; he knew little or nothing about them, their lives or their hopes or their feelings, nay, scarcely that they had any such emotions and were not mere pawns or counters in the masculine game. He had never concerned himself much about them either; they had never come his way, or in any manner bothered him; but now, when he had nothing better to do and was actually brought face to face with them, he regarded with a cold inquisitiveness these three women now proceeding to the altar. He wondered what Eleanora had been thinking about all day, what sort of a tale had been told her, the silly child. The Duchess seemed agitated, though she carried her old head very high and there was a certain gallantry, as well as a certain resignation, in her carriage. She was dressed and adorned with almost fantastic splendour, covered with jewels, rosettes of diamonds, necklaces of pearls, and dragged a long brocade train. The little bride, too, was hung with jewellery, mostly old-fashioned, heavy and unsuitable. Her hair had been powdered and strained back from her pure brow. She wore a white dress and a silver train, hastily, no doubt, put together by the Baroness Charlotte and the maids.

She did not look at her bridegroom, and Hensdorff noticed that the hand on her father's arm was continually

fluttering up and down on his cuff. She seemed more terrified, if such a thing was possible, than she had been that morning when she had been brought before them in the cabinet. "A creature," thought Hensdorff, "without spirit, or, I suspect, education; certainly pretty enough, but I would swear that by this time next year he has left her." All very well now, here in Dürsheim or in Prince Christian's Château on the Danube, but if they came to Vienna or Paris or any of the great cities when the troops are in winter quarters, this little maiden would have a great deal of difficulty in holding her own with the haughty beauties who usually competed for the transient favours of General Crack. Hensdorff could not imagine her even making the attempt; he saw her fading away into the quiet obscurity which had absorbed so many colourless wives of great men; well, never mind, she had served her turn. . . .

The Baroness Charlotte seemed to have been crying, and all the women stood closely together, rather tense and on the defensive, as if they hated and distrusted all the men. Even the cold heart of Hensdorff was moved to a certain pity. A sacrifice, he thought to himself, it really seemed like a sacrifice; and he wondered if this delicate young creature would have been happier with an idealistic type, weak but charming, like Leopold. But if it was a sacrifice, the victim was unresisting. Princess Eleanora, still with her blue glance carefully downwards, put her hand meekly enough in that of her future husband.

Anhalt-Dessau was at once flustered and important. He had by now reconciled himself to the marriage, and even began to see his own part, and a very considerable part, in it. He was very much impressed by Christian; by Christian's obvious power and obvious cold self-assurance which seemed to prophesy the most brilliant success in everything which he undertook. Anhalt-Dessau saw himself being swept along to the most glittering of destinies in the train of his gorgeous son-in-law. He already thought of the Allies as whipped from the field, and himself as one of the principal figures at the coronation of Leopold, when Chris-

tian should have succeeded in placing the Imperial Diadem on the head of the Electoral Prince. In short, he began to feel that he had done very well for his daughter and that he had every reason to congratulate himself on his worldly wisdom. In this manner he was able to gloss over in his own mind his weakness in giving way to Hensdorff, and the rapidity with which, at that statesman's dictation, he had changed his plans for Eleanora. It was, too, no inconsiderable thing, from his point of view, that his daughter was marrying a Lutheran, and that he would be able to say that this Lutheran had become one at his suggestion—nay, as he might put it, at his command. He had not, after all, given Eleanora to a Papist: he could make a great point of that. He might even say to the other Lutheran princes that he had refused the hand of the Emperor rather than allow his daughter to wed outside the circle of the Reformed Faith.

The Duchess, on the other hand, had no consolation for the loss of her favourite relative. She was very dubious indeed about this marriage, very much dismayed and disarranged. Hensdorff, looking at her, wondered what had passed between her and the girl, for he knew that Eleanora had been closeted with the old woman ever since the morning. She had managed to soothe her, at least, managed to make her appear with some sort of dignity and serenity. No doubt she had a considerable influence over the child. But that she was uneasy herself there could be no doubt. Her sunken eyes glanced constantly and furtively at Christian, and with deep contempt at Anhalt-Dessau.

The ceremony proceeded. It was soon over—religious and civil—over before the last light had faded from the bright windows, while a faint glow of after-sunset colouring filled the little square of the chapel. Eleanora had become Christian's wife. Hensdorff licked his lips with satisfaction. The price had been paid, and now the service for which it had been paid could be exacted.

Eleanora turned from the altar and at once left the chapel beside the Duchess, the Baroness Charlotte behind them.

Christian lingered, and with his own hands very handsomely fee'd the pastor. There was no change whatever in his demeanour, and yet to him the moment must be one of most supreme and delicious triumph. Hensdorff respected a man who could be so far master of all his emotions; he knew it more difficult to conceal elation than despair.

Pons and Banning seemed lively and satisfied. They were rejoicing, no doubt, at the prospect of another war, in which they might gain both fame and plunder. Delightful as the life was at Prince Christian's villa on the Danube, they soon wearied of it; they were made for war, and rejoiced when it came their way and the languid intervals of peace were over.

Hensdorff followed the magnificent bridegroom and spoke to him in the corridor outside the chapel. After all, he had every right to emphasize the bargain.

"I hope, Monseigneur," he remarked, "that you are now completely satisfied?"

"Completely satisfied," repeated Christian, with a smile which had no particular meaning.

"And I hope that you will make no delay fulfilling your contract," added Hensdorff.

"I start to-morrow," said Christian, "for Prague. I have had much to consider to-day. There is Italy and Flanders to take into mind. I do not much rely on Olivenza. I think that many of your biggest towns are very poorly fortified. I have a great deal to do: you need not fear that I shall hesitate."

"Remember," smiled Hensdorff, almost as if he spoke in jest, "that you have sworn to crown Leopold of Bavaria. And remember that all the rest of Europe has sworn that he shall not be crowned."

"I remember very well. I do not know why, my dear Count, you trouble to remind me. Is it because you think I shall try to get out of my bargain?"

Hensdorff thought, but dared not say: "Well, a mercenary soldier fights for the highest bidder, his fortune is founded on plunder, bribery and corruption. It's all very well to

take a high hand but I should like to bind him, hard and fast."

Aloud he said: "I suppose Your Highness will not object to swearing allegiance to the Emperor?"

"Not at all," replied Christian lightly. "I will certainly swear allegiance to him while I am in his service, though oaths would make but little difference since I have already given my word of honour."

Hensdorff bowed. The soldier was proud and perhaps might be trusted on that count; though he had so often changed sides, he had a fastidious personal honour and had not yet been known to betray any one. But then, considered the minister, perhaps he had not been ever tempted to betray any one. Now the Allies might offer a very fine price indeed for his services, and he, having secured his wife, might accept it—one never knew, these decayed times. So he detained Christian in the white passage, full of clear sunshine, debating how he might bind him to the service of Leopold.

Christian waited patiently; he quite well read his thoughts and felt compassionate towards the overworked, anxious man.

"Indeed," he remarked at length with an unusual simplicity that was wholly charming, "you may trust me. I hope to do your business for you in one campaign."

"I believe you will," responded the old man, suddenly feeling reassured.

"But if not in one campaign, at least in two or three. All I ask is a free hand, that for which I asked this morning—undisputed command—no interference from your good self, who are, Monseigneur, an able statesman but no soldier, I take it, or from the Emperor, whom I know to be totally inexperienced in warfare. It is as well, though," added Christian, "that he should show himself at headquarters, and sometimes with the army during its engagements, so that the men may see that they do not fight for a puppet. Tell him," he added, "as I reminded you this morning, to behave himself with every dignity he can command.

It is extraordinary how impressive a fine air is to the troops—he must come at once to Prague.”

Christian bowed with an amiable smile and so dismissed Hensdorff, then passed again down the long white corridor. But once more he was detained: the old Duchess stepped out from the door of a small anteroom and asked him for a few moments' speech.

“I wish for your company,” she said nervously, “for just a little while, Monseigneur. Perhaps you may have that amount of patience with an old woman. Eleanora and Charlotte are making ready their equipage, since, I understand, they accompany you to-night.”

“Yes, Madame,” answered Christian, courteously, “they accompany me to-night. There is no manner of hurry; I am entirely at your service.”

He followed her into the little room, which was light and bright, stocked with elegant Meissen china in all manner of satin-lined cabinets. A circle of candles had already been lit, and the bright rays of these blended with the last rays of the setting sun, which penetrated the delicate closet.

The old woman and the young man, surrounded by all this pretty porcelain, sat down formally opposite each other; the Duchess allowed herself a little space in which to collect her wits, while her slightly reddened, dim eyes stared at Christian.

She admired him sufficiently though his birth had greatly prejudiced her against him; had she been young she would have been flattered by his notice; she would have known how to manage him—forty years ago.

She had heard many tales of him, some of which she believed and all of which had been impressive. According to his detractors, he had many glaring faults, but she could vouch for it that he was extremely well-bred—he had the air of Versailles.

To-day, now, he had shown an admirable patience and serenity in a most difficult position that would have overwhelmed many men; he had carried the whole thing off with

an air wholly splendid, the old woman thought, and with what courtesy and reserve he sat, waiting for her pleasure—an old woman who was of no use or interest to him; still that did not alter the atrocity of this hurried marriage, the disgusting behaviour of Anhalt-Dessau, the paltry cowardice of Leopold, the cynical hardness of Hensdorff. The Duchess raged against all of them; she knew what an effort it had cost her to bring the poor child in some serenity to the altar—without any preparation, with hardly a fit gown to her back!

She still stared at Christian in the yellow lustre of the candles; she knew that he must possess intense passions and violent emotions—and how notably he had controlled them all; he had a finer air of Parisian insolence than any German prince she knew, and all the while he presented this exalted front to the world he was enduring the burning rancour of an incurable wound.

Even now, while she gazed at him, she knew that he was aware of her thoughts of him; how she was judging him, his birth ever present in her mind; and he endured this, with immutable patience; gorgeous, arrogant, glittering with the spoils of his insolent career, all the sumptuous ornaments he had snatched from a reluctant world.

The old woman knew something of his enterprise and pride, the circumstance of his plunder and gain from the devastation and waste of war, the many occasions of his increased grandeur wrenched from ruin and blood; high indeed had he risen on piled fragments of dismembered States, this man whose mother had flaunted gutter-bred seductions on a tinsel stage.

The sum of her scrutiny was admiration for a difficult feat accomplished with excellence. Her heavily veined hands trembled on the cane where they rested; then she laughed; she was so old that the world could not long seem to her anything but comedy.

“Bravo! Bravo!” she grinned, nodding her head.

He smiled also, understanding her perfectly.

"Madame, my thanks for your congratulations," he said, speaking French, which was native to him and became him well.

"You don't need them," she replied, relishing his appreciation of her applause, speaking the same language, which gave her agreeable memories of youthful visits to Paris. "Eh, Monseigneur, you have done very well for yourself—very, very well, have you not?"

"I have always endeavoured to make the most of advantages," he smiled, with more than his usual vivacity. She knew that she had not got within his guard, but that he was more at ease with her than with the men, with the Germans at least; less haughtily and insolently on the defensive; and this encouraged her in the effort she had set herself. She nodded again, agreeing with his statement; seeing him there in the rich play of light between the newly lit candles and the expiring beams of the sun, she could admit that he had indeed neglected nothing to set himself off finely; he appeared in all his costly and tasteful fopperies, in his overemphasized dark beauty, a very emblem of worldly grandeur and power.

"So you, Monseigneur," she said, "are again in the flame of battle, entering in broils of dubious issue, and yet you have only enjoyed a brief respite from labour."

"Madame," replied Christian, "I am not one of those who can live in confined comfort, solving all perplexities by housing in warm seclusion, like carnations under glasses."

"You prefer the storms of fate in the open, eh?"

"I was bred to arms," smiled Christian. "But I hope to build up as well as to destroy before my span is over. I do not fight for the sake of brawling but to obtain a realm to administer, Madame—I believe I could do that very well: to plant, to build, to govern, to found a kingdom and renew a family, that were not unambitious."

The old woman kindled to these soaring words:

"You'll do it, Monseigneur. You refer to Kurland?"

"Ay, to Kurland and the House of Ketlar."

"This Leopold must give it to you if you crown him—as

I have no doubt you will crown him. I wish I were a little younger, to be there. Yet a pity it is a moody boy—he may frustrate you, Monseigneur.”

“Madame, one cannot expect a task without impediment or obstacle—one must be grateful that it is no worse than Leopold of Bavaria—if he cannot be commanded, he may be ignored. And with Count Michael Hensdorff I have a stable understanding.”

“And now you are at an end of your patience with me,” remarked the Duchess, “but it is the last time that I shall detain you, Monseigneur. I doubt if I shall survive the winter of your endeavour to the spring of your triumph. Monseigneur, I am seventy years old.”

“Your years become you,” smiled Christian with a certain tender courtesy which she had not expected. “You are, Madame, an encouragement to ladies who fear that, in losing their bloom, they lose everything.”

“Do not encourage *me* too much,” she replied, “for, after all, I brought you here to ask a favour of you—”

“It can scarcely be one that I should deny.”

“Yet it is one I can scarcely ask.”

He said at once: “You wish to speak of Eleanora?”

She was amazed by his swift intuition; yet she might have guessed that he had read her from the first.

“I might have spared my poor diplomacy,” she said rather pitifully, “since I am an open book to you—yes, it is of Eleanora. You have paid a high price for that simple young woman.”

“Madame, that has been done before.”

“Monseigneur, that is why I speak to you—passion will pay—and reason afterwards neglect. Is Eleanora on the level of merchandise—to be bought and used as you will?”

“Madame, I have married her.”

“Perforce,” the Duchess smiled wryly.

“Madame, I have your meaning—but men do not marry where they despise.”

“I have known it done—where pride was high enough and desire hot enough—fling down the fee and snatch the

gratification! How will you consider Eleanora next year? She has neither brains nor wit to match with yours, Monseigneur."

Christian did not reply; he was gazing past the Duchess at the cabinet of silvered porcelain, where the last lingering rays of the sun gave a lustre-like life to the figures of Nymphenburg and Miessen—so many little Eleanoras, frolicking in porcelain.

"I," added the Duchess, "love the child—she is all I have had to love this many a year—so much a child to me it is hard to think her married. She never knew her mother and her father has regarded her harshly—if I do not speak to you, no one will."

"Say what you will, Madame."

"Monseigneur, I hope you love her."

"You do not think I have proved it?" he smiled.

"I said love, Monseigneur." As he did not immediately answer, she added: "I hope you do love her."

Christian rose; at that moment the last sunbeams had faded from the room and the candles alone dispersed the summer dusk.

"I hope I do love her," he replied gravely.

"You spoke just now of Kurland—of your kingdom you believed would emerge from these wars and of establishing there again the name of Ketlar. Had you Eleanora in your mind—throned beside you, Monseigneur? Is she to be your partner in your future glories? I speak plainly."

"I will answer plainly. Eleanora is my choice to share the highest fortune I may achieve."

The Duchess sighed with relief.

"Then I can have little more to say—if this, Monseigneur, is your design—this and no vulgar passion or impetuous whim, you can afford to wait."

"I have learnt how to wait," he replied, thinking of Kurland.

"This," continued the Duchess, "has been a marriage most strange and sudden for one of her quality—she is unprepared, dismayed—and you, Monseigneur, are a stranger to

her, she cannot see you with my eyes. Monseigneur, remember you have your wooing to do, it is not likely that you will fail in it—but now you have no time—let it be deferred.”

“This is your request?” asked Christian directly.

“Monseigneur, love forced is love slain—and she is a child, kept most ignorant, knowing only women and pedants.”

Christian was silent and the Duchess trembled lest he, so acute and swift in his penetration, should see the bottom of all this—Eleanora’s romantic preoccupation with another man, her childish fancy already involved in dreams in which Christian did not figure. If he asked about this point she would have to lie to him for her loyalty was to Eleanora and to the secret she had so easily wrested from the agitated girl, and she did not want to lie to him. Her fear was groundless, the question she dreaded did not remotely come into Christian’s mind. He answered:

“I am pleased that you care enough for Eleanora to speak like this—and I understand all that you have not said. It was my intention to be her guardian before I was her lover—I can afford to wait for the prize I hope to gain. When the campaign is over, in the spring—for it is my intention to keep the field all this winter—I shall return to Ottenheim.” He paused a second and then added in a slightly whimsical tone: “Will you keep her for me, Madame? Will you forego Vienna and remain at Ottenheim with her?”

The old woman’s dull-coloured, heavy face was suffused with a flush of pleasure; she rose and curtsied.

“Monseigneur, I am very honoured.”

And in her grateful heart she vowed to make Eleanora forget that fool’s fancy for Leopold.

“I,” said Christian, negligently, but as one not wishing to shirk an obvious point, “have no family to whom to entrust her—”

The Duchess stopped and countered this proud admission.

"Monseigneur," she said, grandly, "never have I so much regretted not having had a son as since I met you—for my possible heir might have been like you. Though you are too young for that post, think of me as an old woman of your family, jealous of your honour."

Christian had never had such a compliment paid him by a woman of her rank and haughtiness; nothing could have pleased him more; he valued the approval of this withered lady more highly than the shouts of troops or the flatteries of sycophants to which he was too well accustomed. Seldom had he been so well understood; she had completely won his confidence; he trusted his highly priced treasure to her without a doubt or a regret.

That evening the Duchess sat beside Eleanora in the *berline* that proceeded slowly under the unsullied fire of the stars to Ottenheim. Prince Christian, out of compliment to the occasion, accompanied them in the coach, but effaced his presence as much as such a presence could be effaced by reading over the notes his secretaries had written out for him, which he had folded into a copy of Maréchal de Montecuculi's memoirs.

FIFTEEN

IT was no affectation that made Prince Christian absorbed in the sheaf of notes within the pages of Montecuculi as the *berline* proceeded slowly under the starlight from Schönbuchel in Dürsheim to Château Ottenheim; he had never been a man to triumph over his achievements; the coveted Eleanora was his, and he could afford to put her out of his mind. He was also satisfied by the understanding he had come to with the Duchess and by her presence in Ottenheim, fellow watchdog with Pons; so at ease he read between the covers of the little red, leather-covered book. He took no heed whatever either of the Duchess or of Eleanora, but left them to the rather artificial, if hearty, gallantries of the other occupant of the coach, Colonel Pons, to whose conversation the old woman responded in a lively, if rather nervous manner, while the hooded girl remained silent in her corner, looking down at her white hands folded on her silken lap above a paper of comfits.

Christian keenly regarded the facts and figures before him. He was an able engineer and an expert mathematician besides being a leader of men; that is to say, he knew his business thoroughly from beginning to end; no pleasure, no intrigue had ever come before his strenuous studies. He was decidedly pleased that he could now begin to put again into exercise his ardent powers; through his mind went rapidly the plans for the proceeding campaign already mapped out and co-ordinated. He had no doubt the Allies would wish to take the field only for a month or so, and then, according to usual custom, retire into winter quarters, but he did not intend to follow this tedious practice: he meant to force the enemy to continue the campaign throughout the winter, however rigorous that might be. It was by no means to his liking that they should escape him for the whole period of

the severe months; before the snows and frosts came he meant to be in Brussels. Yes, as near as that; to have the Allies pushed right across their own frontiers, well back into Hanover and Holland. At present they held the whole line of the Marne, Huy, Liége, Namur, but he would soon get them out of their imposing forts. There was Bavaria too: they had their claws on that, and that must be released and almost first of all, for it was the Elector's own peculiar patrimony, and not to his honour or to that of his commander that it should remain in the hands of the enemy.

There was Anhalt-Dessau too, and Christian smiled when he visualized the smallness of Anhalt-Dessau on the map. That must be protected: that little speck of land that had suddenly become of such vast importance to himself. Behind Vienna, of course, there was little to be done. Hungary held fast to the queen who called herself Empress; and behind Hungary, Bulgaria and her Czar was steady to the same cause. But forward—forward the whole of the Empire must be cleared; those Lowlanders must be taught their manners too. Christian foresaw himself at the gates of Bergen-op-Zoom and even at those of Breda.

He had already sent many couriers off from Schönbuchel, and meant to send out more from Ottenheim. Maréchal De Lisle, the French commander, held headquarters at Prague. Christian meant to effect a juncture with him as soon as possible. He was glad that he would have to work with De Lisle, a courteous and an able man, an accomplished if not a great soldier, one who, he knew, admired him and would be delighted to work with him as Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Forces. There was no difficulty about the French, though there might be some with the Austrian, Spanish and Italian generals, such as Fürth, Arroya, Olivenza, Knittelfeldt and Guastalla, especially the two first; but these incompetent and flourishing men would soon be mastered by arrogance and force, if not by fear and diplomacy.

As many troops as possible must be got into the field, and as soon as possible. Christian knew that the power of his

name would raise many thousands, both in Kurland and Pomerania, indeed in all parts of the Empire, who would otherwise have remained inactive or reluctant. He did not believe in forced levies, and never had been obliged to use them. Whenever he gave the call to arms, his name promised both pay and plunder and all manner of soldiers had willingly responded; he believed he could crown his man in Frankfurt before Christmas. Nay, not only in Frankfurt, he smiled to himself, but perhaps in Aix-la-Chapelle, the old city of Carlo Magnus. That would be amusing, to flaunt the Allies so far as that. He wondered if Hensdorff would think the bargain fulfilled then, if Leopold of Bavaria was doubly crowned at Frankfurt and Aix-la-Chapelle, and so, twice robed in the purple, escorted back to Vienna—swept by a conquering army to the very gates of the Hofburg.

The English were most to be feared, both for their courage and their organization; but they were fighting under princes alien to them, and had engaged in the war with reluctance. Christian knew full well that soldiers ill-supported at home seldom made a good figure on the field; at the first reverse the English Parliament would force a peace.

Early on the morrow he, Hensdorff and Anhalt-Dessau would ride to Prague with the regiments of Uhlans, Husars and Croats that he had now at Ottenheim—his own regiments. A few troops would be left behind to guard the women, but not many, because Ottenheim was safe enough so far away, miles behind the line Austria still held, and would be much farther still when Christian had pushed the Imperial fortunes nearer to the enemy's frontiers.

Christian wondered if the battalions from Italy, Lombardy and Mantua had come up yet; it was time; Guastalla deserved to be cashiered for being so long on the way; he had been sent for in the spring; it had not been for him to take advantage of this foolish truce to linger; the longer the conference sat in Brussels, the quicker should have been his progress across the Alps. There was a great deal in every way to do, but it could be done; there were a great many

towns to take, but they could be taken; there were a great many miles to march, but they could be marched; there were a great many men to muster, but they could be raised; there were a great many different personalities to conciliate, but Christian could conciliate them. In complete self-confidence, in serene self-assurance he closed his book as they turned into the straight avenue which led to the Château Ottenheim. His thoughts turned to his own land on the Baltic—Kurland, where he would be lord indeed when Leopold was Emperor, a part, and only a small part, of his reward; the future glittered.

Christian smiled at the Duchess as if he had suddenly realized her presence, and asked her, in his soft, indifferent-sounding voice, if she had found the drive at all tedious? She answered, hurriedly, no; that it had been very pleasant, talking with Colonel Pons and looking out upon the stars, which shone so pleasantly and so brightly over the valley; it was like noontide for the radiance of the river.

Christian, in the same impersonal tone, then asked Eleanora if she felt fatigued after a day which, he added, must have been of a certain agitation. He hoped, he said, that she would find all she wished in the Château, and was sorry that his sudden departure prevented him from more personally and immediately being at her service.

Eleanora glanced at him in a frightened way and did not answer, though her lips moved as if to form some words of apology or acquiescence.

"She will be very well," said the Duchess hastily. "Monseigneur, I assure you that Eleanora will be very well. And of course we are, both of us, slightly fatigued, and if we could at once retire to our apartments we should be indebted to your courtesy."

An adroit *maitre d'hôtel* had hastily adjusted these same apartments for the reception of the ladies. The voluptuous tapestries, amorous pictures, and coquettish statues had been removed from Prince Christian's rooms, his bedchamber draped with a more decorous fabled arras, and a considerable number of books in the library exchanged for those more

fitting the perusal of a lady. All this on receipt of a message sent from Christian at Schönbuchel. He did not keep inefficient people in his service; his commands were always immediately and swiftly obeyed; everything was now in order, and his own quick glance round the Château saw that his least wish had been quickly put into execution.

A delicious supper was prepared for the ladies, but when they declared that they did not wish for this, and would rather at once go to their rooms, they were immediately escorted with the celerity of a fairy service to the beautiful apartments at the back of the Château overlooking the Danube. Here was more splendour than Eleanora, educated austere and brought up strictly, had ever in her life beheld before. The lamplight revealed to her a shining and gorgeous room, in the most extravagant and cultured French taste, furnished in every detail with sophisticated beauty. The Duchess was hardly less magnificently housed; she could scarcely restrain an ironic grin, ay, one did oneself magnificently out of pay and plunder, rout and spoil!

Christian, with indifferent courtesy, took leave of them and retired into his private cabinet with Count Hensdorff and Colonel Pons. There was a great deal that he still wished to learn from Hensdorff; for the time being this minister was in the position of an ally, ready with necessary information and loyal service. He did not doubt Hensdorff; their interests were now identical, and there was a certain quality about the statesman that Christian respected. He never gave a thought, as a lesser man might have done, to the possibility of Hensdorff deceiving him, betraying him or in any way playing him false. He really rather liked Hensdorff, and he thought that Hensdorff rather liked him; between them, he knew they would have to do everything.

The long-disputed bargain had been at length settled. There was nothing more to argue about, and they might be quite good friends. So much was said in Christian's smile as he glanced across at Hensdorff over the maps and documents with which the Russian malachite table was strewn.

"You and I, my dear Count," he remarked, "must now get things clear. It seems to me that we've got very little time in which to consider anything. This is my plan of campaign, and I shall be glad to know if it has your approval. As to the assent of the Emperor, I suppose we need not trouble to send a courier to Vienna to demand that. You and I, I take it, my dear Count, can decide these matters between us."

"It was understood," agreed Hensdorff, "that you were to have supreme command. There is no question of referring to Leopold or even to me."

He said this, knowing that Christian had only spoken out of courtesy, and that he would certainly act on his own initiative and without any regard to any one.

Christian bowed, accepting the return compliment, and remarked:

"I am afraid there may be trouble with the other generals—not with De Lisle, of course, or with any of the Frenchmen, but perhaps with Guastalla, Arroya and Olivenza."

"You will be able to see to that," remarked Hensdorff drily.

Christian brought out his maps and his fine hand went up and down over them, pointing out this place to be taken, that place to be avoided, this fort which must fall, that city which must surrender, that village which must be occupied. Hensdorff listened with the deepest admiration and even with a certain growing excitement. In the presence of this man, so long accustomed to full command, so supreme in his own self-assurance, the Count felt a growing confidence in his own doubtful cause, a growing certainty that Leopold would indeed be the Emperor and he his first Minister. All that had been vague, confused, undecided, now seemed strong, definite, straightforward.

In a few hours Christian had mapped out the whole campaign, foreseen everything, arranged everything, made out a list of his requirements—men, money, horses, artillery—and suggested names for the posts of Paymaster General and Quartermaster General. Hensdorff could find no flaw in

anything he suggested; here was experience and great talent working together.

Of course, there was the question of the money, but for the moment the treasury was not so badly replenished. Hensdorff thought he could answer for the cash for the next few months at least, and Christian had very ample private resources which no doubt he would be glad to call upon in a cause which was practically his own cause; in any case he would equip and pay his own regiments.

When he had briefly and clearly explained himself, he pushed aside his maps and notes and rose swiftly.

"I must get a little sleep," he said, "for I have promised to ride early to Prague. Nothing quite definite can be decided upon until I have spoken to De Lisle, until I am quite sure of the French—they are fatigued and disheartened, I know. It is now," he added, pulling back the curtain and looking from the window, "nearly dawn."

And, as he spoke, Hensdorff recalled for the first time that this was Christian's wedding night. Odd, thought Hensdorff; odd, from first to last; the whole business odd. But it was no matter of his, and he, too, would be glad of a little repose before setting out on the long journey tomorrow. So he bade his host a cordial good night and left him in the little cabinet, curious, but satisfied about that day's business.

Colonel Pons also soon left. He had his orders and asked nothing more than the chance to carry them out; he was soured that he was to remain at Ottenheim but gratified at the trust shown him; he admitted there was no one else worthy of this trust.

Christian, alone in the cabinet, pulled the curtains farther apart from the window and again looked out at the paling sky. He delighted in that noble prospect of the Danube. It was because of the Danube, and not to rival Leopold at Bosenberg, that he built his Château at Ottenheim.

An eventful day for him, he mused, this past day, a day in which he had gained what men called a heart's desire; he hoped that he had been able to conceal from every one that

it was his heart's desire, that no one had been able to get behind the barrier of his smiling gravity. He thought that by now he had had good practice in that; surrounded always by people watching and spying, ready to sneer and grin, he was well used to concealing his feelings behind a serene insolent mask. The Duchess had probed and he had allowed her to know his mind, but this brought no rankle; he was glad she understood him; he was safe in his house, his wife under his roof, surrounded by his guards, in every way his, to be kept for him till he should return.

He thought of her with an overwhelming tenderness from which all gross passion had been purged. No tumultuous emotion now disturbed him as he dwelt on the image of Eleanora; he had achieved her; she was his, and he could afford to wait, as he had so long waited, as he had promised he would wait. He could wait a little longer now before indulging in even the raptures of the mind. She was safe with the loyal, cynical, valiant old woman, with her own attendants around her, in this splendid house, far away from all possible danger; and he, with a quiet heart, could set about paying the price that he had sworn to pay for her, that he was in honour bound to pay for her; that it was his choice and pride to pay.

He wondered with a compassionate irony if she disliked him; that she did not like him he was sure: he had noticed that she turned away from him with quivering frowns; but he was too used to success in every direction to doubt success in this direction. It did not seem possible to the valiant arrogant, self-reliant man that he could in time fail to win this girl. He could not recall having failed with any other woman, and why should he fail here? He would give her everything she wished—nay, more than she could possibly wish, more than she could ever even have dreamt of. He knew quite well that she had not led a very soft or easy life with her disagreeable, pedantic old father, who had fussed and fumed and fretted over her, who had treated her as a schoolgirl and scorned her for childish fancies and dreaming ways. He, her husband, would allow her all the fancies and

all the dreams that she could possibly yearn for ; all the toys and trifles, too.

Christian smiled to himself again to think how little she knew of him, how little she ever would know of him, and how he knew, and always would know, everything about her, she who was as transparent as crystal. He pictured her in his superb bed in his beautiful room, surrounded by all the delicious and splendid things that expressed his own refined and sophisticated taste, things he had bought as the rewards of his victories. How had she slept on this night, which must be to her so strange a night?

Perhaps now with the dawn she found her first sleep ; or perhaps she had slept and was now awake ; in any case it would be as well that he should say good-bye to her before leaving her—perhaps for months leaving her. He had no wish to leave on her mind the impression of a severe master, but rather that of a friend, a benefactor.

He had the keys of her chamber in his desk, and his steady heart leapt as he touched them. He took off his sword and belt and the chains and orders which he had worn all day, and turned down the long, ornate, quietly lit corridors of Ottenheim.

She slept alone ; only a little black boy lay curled up at her door on the green satin cushion in the anteroom. The old Duchess was on the floor above and Charlotte in the rooms beyond. In all these great, gorgeous chambers the Princess Eleanora slept alone with a little black page curled up at her door, in the room where the guards used to wait.

Christian entered his bedchamber without waking the child ; he could step lightly. The two long windows of the large apartment were open and the curtains pulled apart ; he could see the gilt swelling balustrade of the balcony, the blue landscape meltingly sweet beyond. The summer dawn filled the room with pearly light ; with silver, unearthly light.

The newly hung glittering draperies of the bed were drawn to, and she lay in the attitude in which the page had lain, huddled up under the tumbled, rich bedclothes, her soft

hand nestling under her soft cheek. She felt that she was asleep; her limbs were sickly still with grief.

Christian sat down crosswise on the end of the bed and looked at her; she was fully revealed in the radiance of the breaking day. The place, the moment, were so holy and full of an almost unbearable joy; he watched the future, full of a rapture that seemed veritable for the world. He certainly loved her, he told himself, and so tremendous was this love that when it ceased he felt his life would cease too; surely there could be no further existence when there was no Eleanora to love. In this silence, in this remote room, in this still, early hour, he seemed to feel a touch of eternity in looking at her lovely youth; he seemed to feel the immortal in the transient, the certainty of the radiant and everlasting soul in the frail and doomed clay.

His love for her could not be of a great while passing time, but must have root in a past and throw flowering branches into a future that was beyond all mortal computation with lean words like "death" and "time." She was his now, given to him, in his power now and forever; his and in his power; and not for twice the value of that diadem which he had sworn to put on Leopold of Bavaria's brow would he have harmed her or frightened her in any way, even by telling her his adoration. The Duchess need not have warned him, though he honoured her for that warning; a proof of affection indeed which had made him decide to ask her to Ottenheim to leave Eleanora in her care. He would so leave her with a good heart, admiring the old woman for the courage with which she had spoken to him, for her appreciation of his motives.

"I hope you love Eleanora," she had said, and he had answered, uncertain how to put so great a matter into words: "I hope I do love her."

And now he knew; certainly he loved her; his long-subdued passion could not have been stifled to this reverence had he not loved her.

She stirred in her sleep and threw out her hand. He

touched it delicately, curiously, and at that touch she started and woke, for her slumbers had been full of unkind dreams. Not for long had she known oblivion; the tears on her cheeks were still wet, as was the pillow from which she raised her head.

At sight of him she started up in panting alarm and pulled the bedclothes to her chin. Christian smiled in tender amusement.

"A little liberty," he said, "is permitted before one's husband, Madame, but probably you have not yet realized that I am your husband. I admit the ceremony was very hurried, but in a few hours I shall ride away and leave you your freedom for months," he added with formality, rising.

She looked relieved, but he was not hurt by that; he had so long before him. She pulled her lace cap under her chin and nervously tied the blue strings.

"You are mistress here," he reminded her. "The Duchess is with you, and Charlotte, and your own maids, and all the rest are your guards or your servants. I shall leave Colonel Pons in command; he is a loyal man and you may trust him. Whatever you say he will do, whatever you want you shall have."

But Eleanora continued to look at him in fright and seemed unable to speak; rosy, rounded and plump, she nestled into the coverlet and cushions.

"I am going to the war," added Christian, "but it will not be long before I am back. Perhaps you will sometimes write to me? Perhaps you will sometimes think of me? Who knows?" And he laughed lightly to himself, happy in the thought of the future.

"You are going to the war?" whispered Eleanora. The Duchess had told her something of that. "What are you going to fight for, Monseigneur?"

"I am going," he smiled, "to put the diadem on the head of Leopold of Bavaria. Perhaps you have heard of that dispute for the Imperial Crown?"

Eleanora had heard from the Duchess of the renewal of the war, when she had been told who Captain Leopold was,

and she looked at Christian now with a more lively interest, with even a forgetfulness of her fear. She did not regard him as her husband or her possible lover, but as the man who was going to uphold the fortune of Leopold, who was going to crown him and make him to be indeed the Emperor.

"You saw Leopold," added Christian, "two nights ago. He sat at your father's table. Did you notice him?" ("He is but a slight creature, but I must make the best of him," was on his lips to add, but he repressed this out of loyalty.)

Eleanora did not answer this: she did not want to talk about Leopold, least of all to Christian, but she cherished in her heart the prospect of his being made Emperor, and she looked with admiration at Christian, who was to accomplish this glorious end. She had asked the Duchess why Leopold had ridden away and why he had come in disguise to Dürsheim. She had not been answered and had not been able to guess. She did not know anything of the bargain which had been made about her hand, or of the real cause of Leopold's incognito and of his discomfited withdrawal.

Christian, leaning on the side of the splendid bed, was suddenly speaking to her with a deep, with a passionate, with a fastidious tenderness.

"What is it you would like? I do not think you have often had what you would like. But I can give you anything. What do you want? A chariot with white ponies, toy dogs, jewels? See, I have a jewel for you here—something I have brought for you, something I had made for you a long time ago, soon after I first saw you. I have been carrying it about with me for days, waiting for an opportunity to give it to you, Eleanora."

He brought from under the laces on his bosom a small tortoise-shell case and, opening it, showed a fine gold chain on which hung two green diamonds. He dropped these on the coverlet. One of these diamonds came from the regalia of Kurland; Christian had worn it as a hat clasp; since he had met Eleanora he had scoured Europe and Asia for another and found it, though it was not of so perfect a colour as the first which his father had bought from the

King of Poland with a regiment of Hussars, and which was named Mitau. These two diamonds, in and out of which the blue and green light slipped in long beams, were cupped in minute filigree gold shaped like curling opening buds; the chain was gossamer fine.

"There is a pretty toy for you," Christian said. "Wear it sometimes, will you not? They have dressed you very badly with all those old-fashioned, clumsy jewels; with all those stiff Venetian brocades. You must get your clothes in Paris in the Palais Royal. I will see that you get them there. I will send you a French dressmaker and a French hairdresser—I want you to look very beautiful, Eleanora; you must not let them spoil you with their heavy German taste."

Eleanora listened to him as if she did not comprehend what he said, or the value of his gift; she shrank farther away into her pillows. She looked, indeed, like a pink pearl in this delicious brightening light of the dawn. She was impressed by his extravagant, dark splendour, by his vital, triumphant air, by the force and power in his eyes and words; but she was thinking all the while of Leopold, and of how these qualities might serve Leopold. She did not touch the diamonds.

"Oh, lovely, lovely, lovely!" thought Christian, gazing at her. "Like a flower, like a shell, like a star! And mine, mine, mine!" His to be kept and guarded for him, his to be won in a long and delicious leisure. All his pulses seemed to swing to the rhythm of a triumphal march; proud melodies filled the air, the waving of banners and the shouts of battle went by the placid window light against the background of the Danube.

He was glad, he rejoiced that he had had to pay a noble price for this noble prize; that victorious campaigns and fallen cities must go to pay for the Princess Eleanora. Not for any less thing than the winning of a diadem for another man would have bought her. And she, too, should be crowned, robed and crowned in her beauty; Duchess of Kurland she should be—ay, and of other lands besides,

before he had completed his career; it would take more than Kurland to quench his ambition.

"You are safe here," he assured her, "utterly safe. Do not be alarmed about anything. I lead the Emperor's armies, and I shall push them back even farther than they are now from Ottenheim. And you will not be lonely here, and it will not be long before the spring—and my return."

He paused and stood looking down at her with infinite affection, with infinite pity, compassion, and delight. His rapture had passed beyond material passion and become a spiritual emotion; he did not want to possess her yet other than with his soul. It was no forbearance on his part to leave her thus, but an acknowledgment of the radiant quality of his love. He would not even kiss her hand for fear of profaning this perfect moment, so gilded with exquisite triumph.

"Farewell, Eleanora," he said. "Farewell, my love!" he added under his breath.

Eleanora's vague dreads and alarms had been soothed; she saw that he was going to leave her and she was reassured; she wanted to be alone to indulge her lulling dreams of the other man.

"Farewell, Monseigneur," she trembled in reply, "and may good fortune attend you and His Imperial Majesty!"

Christian only heard a touching formality in these words; he did not know how sincere were her good wishes for Leopold. How could he guess that she looked more kindly on him because he was the champion of the young man who had so invaded her enclosed fancy; he dared not linger, the perfect moment must not dissolve, like a bubble too vivid to endure; already the common glow of day was invading the chamber. With a hundred rapturous farewells unspoken on his lips he left her; Eleanora peered round the curtains to see him go.

When the door was closed on him she picked up the green diamond called Mitau and its lesser fellow, and set this twin lustrous sparkle in delight against her bare bosom; forgetting everything as she viewed her own whiteness set off by the splinters of azure and emerald radiance.

SIXTEEN

PRINCE CHRISTIAN and his cavalcade left the banks of the Danube, and went as directly as the roads permitted towards Nuremberg, on the route to Prague, where they were to be joined by the Imperial troops garrisoning that town. At the hot midday they halted, and Christian, in a chance room of the best house in a wayside village, took the first repose that he had known for hours.

He was, however, scarcely conscious of fatigue; his robust body was borne up by his robust thoughts; his powerful mind, active and acute, required little rest or pause in its constant occupation of deliberate and courageous thought. He sat down at once to his travelling desk and wrote to Linx, the famous engineer, now sulking in Turin, whose services he was eager to regain for the Imperial Cause; then to the King of Prussia who had left every party in turn, but who favoured General Crack. These dispatched, he put business out of his mind.

The day was bright with the last hot radiancy of summer, the whole landscape outlined in gold, the poor village gilded. Christian paused now to consider, not the formidable task in front of him, but the ravishment of the relinquished delights that he had left behind. Not Prague, or even Brussels, was in his mind, but Ottenheim, and the chamber of Eleanora, shining as a rainbow in the dawn.

He had sent Hensdorff to Vienna, bidding him bring the Emperor without any delay to Prague, there to meet the French and assume the nominal command of the Imperial Forces. It was imperative, Christian had insisted, that Leopold should at once assume at least the appearance of the Cæsar; such pretensions as his, the mercenary had smiled, required at least a definite posture of rigid royalty.

Now that Christian had entered the service of Leopold,

he was scrupulous always to give him his full titles; there was no slight or sneer in the manner in which he referred to Leopold—as if the fact of his being his master dignified him to the height of the uttermost claim.

Hensdorff had noted and approved this attitude. He had also approved the insistence of Christian on the presence of Leopold at the French headquarters; and, afterwards, in the forefront of the war. The old Count wished that Leopold had had the courage and the fortitude to remain at Dürsheim, instead of flying like a defeated creature back to his detested capital; he had therefore gone willingly to Vienna.

From this mean village room, Christian, checking his reserves, sent out courier after courier to the Spanish general, Olivenza, the Italian general, Guastalla, and to Maréchal De Lisle, apprising them that he was now the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Forces, begging them to inform him of their dispositions and plans as quickly as possible, and naming Prague as the instant rendezvous for the junction of all the Emperor's troops.

It was late in the languid afternoon before he had finished dictating these dispatches, but he no longer felt any desire for sleep. A certain fatigue had assailed him when he had dismounted at the door of the tree-shadowed house; but now that was gone, an inner fire of exaltation supported him; to think of victory and Eleanora was sufficient refreshment for his arduous soul; to sleep would be to miss some hours of triumphant reflections.

He sent for Herr Lippmann, the astrologer, who on his own entreaty had accompanied him on this martial progress.

"Well, Herr Lippmann," he asked, smiling, "what do you think of my destiny now?"

And the subtle astrologer, bowing, said:

"No doubt it is still somewhat in the balance; but it swings very well to the advantage of Your Highness."

"The stars?" cried Christian, on a note of exultation. "I feel that I could throw up my hat and catch them in it! A fig for your stars, Herr Lippmann, and all your prophecies!"

"Your Highness," replied Herr Lippmann, curiously, "seems well pleased!" And he looked with a certain amazement at the superb figure, whose splendour the meanness of the room was unable in any way to efface. Christian, walking up and down this village parlour, seemed like the master of any destiny in the watching eyes of Herr Lippmann and the two secretaries, gathering up their dispatches from the rough, wooden table, stained from many a homely meal.

"Do you not think I shall succeed, Lippmann?" asked the magnificent soldier. "Do you not think that I look like success?"

"I think Your Highness seems success itself," replied the old man. "The flaw in your scheme is the man you fight for: if Cæsar, now, were of another quality!"

But Christian brushed that aside: as a man who sees all obstacles as mist before the sun of his endeavours.

"Leopold is well enough!" he said. "I trust to make a fine, flourishing figure of him yet."

He dismissed the astrologer and the secretaries and sat down to write in his own hand a letter to the Princess Eleanora, and another to the Duchess of Schönbuchel; it was characteristic of his direct and energetic spirit that every scrap and shred of business had been disposed of before he set himself this amiable task. No personal affairs had ever interfered with public affairs where Christian was concerned, and they would not interfere now, rapt as he was in a profound and arduous emotion.

He was a soldier even before he was the lover of Eleanora; never would she come between him and his work. He wrote for an hour or so in a flowing fashion, relieving in graceful words the concealed pent ardours of months; and when he had finished, without reading the paper he tore it up and cast it down behind the stove. The moment had not yet arrived for him to risk frightening her with the elegant violence of even these written declarations; she would not understand.

The formal note to the Duchess was sealed. In it he told her—what he had told her by word of mouth—that

he trusted her, and hoped to receive her frequent reports as to the health and happiness of his wife; he asked her to write to the headquarters at Prague, and assured her with tactful discretion that all his goods and wealth and power were at her disposal, for the moment at least. He knew that these attractions would appeal to the worldly old woman; although he could rely on her to look after Eleanora for the girl's own sake; he had learnt never to rely too much on abstract virtues.

And then, sitting there in superb bravery and flamboyant bedecked attire, sitting there alone in the mean and squalid room, his thoughts went oddly far away—far away even from Eleanora, and back to his own childhood and that one glimpse he had had of his mother's picture: his Italian Columbine mother, whose violent Southern blood had so flavoured his own.

He recalled how his father had one day asked him into the library in the palace of Mitau and had taken out a case of red leather from a tortoise-shell and brass cabinet, and shown him this woman's face, painted on a square of ivory—a dark, lively woman whose vivacious eyes, whose curling red lips, laughed from the picture. Swarthy she had been, with a profusion of dark curls—a profusion of dark curls like his own; with black eyes like his own, too; with the same joy of life looking through the same arrogance; too vivid, too bright, too swift for these slow, dull times.

Christian had never seen that miniature again, nor been able to find it when his father died and he had been briefly master of the palace, and the library, and the books, and had searched for it, not once, but many times. He knew nothing about his mother save her nationality and profession; his father had always barred that subject, only alluding to it on this one occasion—and then not by words, but by the mere silent showing of the picture, with a cold hand and a scornful lip. He wondered now if his father had loved his mother as perversely as he loved Eleanora, and he thought, "No; this could not have been so, or some way or other he would have contrived to marry her, and

spared me a lifetime of secret shame and bitter disappointment."

His musing thus coming round to his hidden wound, he raged, and walked restlessly up and down the room. He felt a sudden fatigue grow on his limbs, and wished to lose himself in dreams.

It was yet early in the evening, but there was nothing to be done; he had accomplished all his business. Nor was there any special need for desperate haste. The country all round was firm for Leopold, and it was unlikely that the Allies had even begun to move as yet. Even if he took two or three days on the road, he would be at Prague before they had begun to stir. Well he knew their lethargic habits, and the dissensions in their ranks; their reluctance to recommence the war, and the disputes among the Commanders.

He meant, before they had decided on any definite line of action, to have their fortresses rattling round their ears—to have them pushed back over the frontiers into Hanover and the farthest ends of the Low Countries. He must inspire De Lisle with more energy than he had yet shown, and urge those elegant French troops into a more energetic display of vigour.

But he was capable of doing this: he knew that his name would run like wildfire through the men, inspiring them to more than they had dreamed of undertaking since he left their command. The war had languished sorely since he had served the Queen of Hungary and afterwards retired from the fight, having swept up all the rewards and plunder for the moment offering.

"I ought to end it by the spring," he said to himself, pacing about; "I ought to have them beaten back and asking for peace before the spring."

Captain Banning came to tell him that a more decent lodging had been found; but Christian refused to move. He was, he said, very well in the cottage, and had no wish for more sumptuous quarters. Yet into this same cottage he crowded his valets and barbers, and in the morning had preserved his usual appearance of unsullied elegance; powdered,

perfumed, close-shaved, he appeared in a uniform admirably fitting and admirably adorned with every device of luxurious military appointment.

"I dreamt well last night," he told Banning, with his brilliant smile; and indeed the night had passed for him like a rapturous vision.

He reviewed his immaculate troops in the field beyond the village; this was a formality, as Christian always kept his men in the prime of condition, and as he rode between the precise ranks, his trained eye was considering the village and the country; he had no interest in boors, but as he surveyed the prospect, prosperous and well ordered despite the war, he was thinking of Kurland, of how he would plan, build up, administer, improve agriculture, lay out towns, found universities, erect palaces—have done with war, construct instead of destroy. He set no confines to those bold designs which occupied his mind as he again took the road to Nuremberg with his magnificent, invincible air, riding in front of the banners of Austria and Kurland, the Lions of Ketlar and Hapsburg.

While General Crack was thus advancing on Prague, Ferdinand Gabor was reaching Vienna, where he tried to obtain an audience of Leopold. Not succeeding in this, he got into touch with Hensdorff, and put before him his claims for recognition and reward, stating how he had been cashiered from Christian's regiment.

"This whole matter," he reminded the statesman, "is my doing. I told you the bait at which Christian would jump, even if *you* put it on the hook."

This was true, and Hensdorff had no wish to ignore the obligation; but he wanted to understand what the trouble had been between Christian and the Transylvanian. He remembered with what impetuous coldness Christian had told him that Gabor was no longer in his service. Something rather serious must have happened for Christian to talk like that, with such keen decision; for Hensdorff knew that Christian was not so particular or fastidious in his choice of instruments nor in the character of his officers. What, then,

had Gabor done to have been so summarily and so instantly dismissed?

Count Hensdorff, closeted at last with Gabor in a cabinet in the Hofburg, asked this.

"Why," he demanded, "did Christian dismiss you? What is this secret trouble?"

"There was none," replied the Transylvanian, suavely; "nothing but the ill-regulated temper of an arrogant man—the swelling presumption of an upstart."

"But that," Hensdorff sharply reminded him, "you have been able to put up with for a good many years, in the same way that Prince Christian has put up with you. There must be something more, and you had better tell me if we are to be of any use to each other."

Gabor shrugged his lean narrow shoulders, and his sallow face took on a look of dark irony.

"You do not know Christian as I know him," he sneered. "He is a spoilt darling of fortune, and indulges every whim and caprice that crosses his proud mind. His caprice then was to be tired of me. I suppose that he was rather elated by his triumph and overwrought by the effort to conceal this excitement. I at least was the scapegoat for his mood; I have been before—it is always his endeavour to conceal in public those gross vulgar passions he indulges in private."

But Hensdorff was not deceived; he knew that there was something behind all this spite and he demanded impatiently:

"Why don't you tell me what it is, Gabor? You are no longer in Prince Christian's service, and therefore not very much use to me. What do you want? A reward? Well, you shall have it; but let us not make too much ado about it, for I have many matters on hand."

"I do not desire a reward," answered Gabor; "I want service with the Emperor. You know well enough what I am worth. For years I have been Christian's secret service agent and spy and newsmonger; and I am well used to all the backwaters of intrigue. He owes to me a great deal of the success that he flaunts."

"I dare say," agreed Hensdorff, negligently.

"And you," Gabor repeated, "certainly owe to me the compact you have just sealed."

But Michael Hensdorff insisted:

"The Prince is not the man to dismiss any one without a good reason—especially a man like you, whom he has found supremely useful."

Observing that the astute Hensdorff was not to be satisfied, Gabor then admitted, with another shrug and a malicious sneer, that he had been found talking with the Princess Eleanora between the hornbeam hedges of the quidnunc at Dürsheim.

"Escorting her back to the Château," he said, "and Monseigneur took offence at this—was affronted that I should have dared to talk to or look at the lady! And struck me, Count Hensdorff—struck me on the face! The gutter manners of his mother, you perceive they come to the surface, after years of Versailles."

Count Hensdorff understood now; he could visualize the scene accurately. His sympathies were with Christian; had he been the betrothed or the husband of Princess Eleanora, or of any woman, he would not have cared to see her speaking to Gabor, or such as Gabor, behind any hornbeam hedge.

"Well," he remarked drily, "no more; no need to go any further into that. What is it you want of me? I dare say some manner of post can be found for you where your peculiar talents will be useful."

But Gabor wanted more than this; he wanted an audience with the Emperor; nothing else would satisfy him save that peculiar favor.

"With Leopold?" asked Hensdorff, bored. "But why? He is the last man to have any interest in such an affair as this. Let him alone: he is already sufficiently agitated and disarrayed. This whole matter has gone hardly with him, and I have had considerable difficulty in schooling him for his part."

"No matter for that," persisted Gabor; "perhaps what I

have to say or suggest to him will put him into better spirits."

Hensdorff considered that such a villain could have nothing to say that would put any man into good spirits, least of all one as sensitive and nervous as Leopold and, at present, as ill-tempered; and so he refused to arrange the interview; but Gabor was not disheartened; he beat upon his point and finally his persistency bore down the wearied reluctance of Hensdorff, who did finally arrange for him to speak to the Emperor, the hour after the audience given by His Majesty to the Ambassador of France.

Ferdinand Gabor waited patiently in the gilded lofty corridor for this opportunity; he did not mind how long the delay if the plan which was maturing in his mind could be brought to success; he was a patient and a concentrated man.

At length the Frenchman took his leave, and Gabor had his chance at last; for Hensdorff opened the tall scrolled door and sourly beckoned him within. And there was Leopold, looking discontented and sad, seated in the window-place and staring over the Court of Honour—the bleak, grey, enormous square that bounded the monstrous façade of the dreary Hofburg.

Leopold did not in any particular appear more the Emperor than he had appeared at Dürsheim, but Gabor bowed very low, as if he saw him robed and crowned at Frankfurt, and contrived to throw a deep reverence into his servile obeisance.

Leopold eyed him with peevish indifference; he knew nothing whatever about this man's wish with him for Hensdorff had been careful not to relate the reason of his dismissal from Dürsheim. All that Leopold knew of Gabor was that he was some manner of secret agent or spy who had been employed by Christian, and, having left that service, wished to serve him in some secret way. So he asked languidly, and not without contempt:

"What is this matter on which you wish to speak to me, Prince Gabor? I have been greatly loaded and plagued

with business to-day, and if you could speak briefly I should be obliged."

Ferdinand Gabor answered humbly:

"Your Majesty shall not complain that I am not brief; what I have to say is soon said. Not, perhaps, so soon understood or acted upon. I cannot hope that Your Majesty will at first take it kindly: you may even be affronted; but I speak as one man of the world to another, if Your Majesty will pardon that amount of presumption." And he could not keep a leer from his lean, ruined face.

But the harassed Leopold was in no mood to pardon any man's presumption, and he did not answer, but looked indifferently upon the ground, frowning and playing with his ruffles.

"What I have to say," insinuated Gabor, "concerns the Princess Eleanora."

And at that name Leopold did look up, and sharply, while a lively colour overspread his long pale face.

"What can *you* have to do with the Princess Eleanora?" he demanded impetuously.

"Very little indeed, Sire," smiled Gabor; "but I did see and hear something when I was at Dürsheim which should be of some interest to you. But perhaps I am mistaken; and if so, I take my leave, saying no more."

"You are not mistaken," replied Leopold, indiscreetly in his hurried passion. "If it concerns the Princess Eleanora it *is* of interest to me. So much you seem to know: speak, then."

"I was dismissed the service of Prince Christian," said Gabor deliberately, "because I was found speaking to the Princess Eleanora—nay, rather because the Princess Eleanora spoke to me—contrived to make an occasion, Sire, and spoke to me."

"Spoke to you?" cried Leopold. "What is your meaning? Come to it quick!"

"My meaning is, Sire," continued Gabor, in a hurried, low tone, "the Princess Eleanora spoke to me about Your Majesty. She begged me to step aside, to come with her into

the woods, to walk with her there, while she asked about Your Majesty. She had discovered your identity from the Duchess, and she asked me why you had ridden away—why you had not persevered in your suit for her hand.”

“She knew as much?” cried Leopold, aghast, absolutely off his guard; “she knew as much as that?”

He had stepped at once into the trap that the astute Transylvanian had set for his ingenuous simplicity.

“Yes, she knew as much as that, and she begged me to convey a message to Your Majesty—to ask you to rescue her from her marriage with Prince Christian of Kurland, a desperate, urgent, personal message from a lady hemmed in and distressed.”

“Is it possible?” cried Leopold. “Is it possible?”

“It is very possible, Sire, but I was interrupted in the midst of this frantic confidence. Prince Christian, suspecting that there was no good to his interests in our conference, spied on us, struck me and dismissed me. I had to fly from Dürsheim.”

Leopold put his hand to his full trembling lips to smother a fierce exclamation. All this was too late now; she was married; two or three days ago married. He knew as much as that from Hensdorff. What was the use of Gabor talking now?

And then he reflected, in his enormous bewilderment, that this might be a trap—a trick; it seemed hardly likely that Eleanora (simple as he knew her), would have so expressed herself to a man like Gabor; and so he hesitated, biting his lips behind his fingers, looking down on the ground, paling and then flushing—an object for the scorn of the astute eyes of the wily observer; pacing up and down the room, wondering and debating, in his agitated and invaded heart. What could he do? Anyhow, it was too late! And he repeated to himself those two most fatal words: “Too late! Too late!”

“I thought,” murmured Gabor, insidiously, “that your Imperial Majesty would like to know that the Princess Eleanora has a lively interest in you. She spoke of her prayers, of her hopes for your success, fears for your pos-

sible failure; her whole heart, her perpetual interest is yours, Sire!"

In this he went too far, as a coarse-grained man may go in dealing with a fine personality; his contempt for all of them was too apparent in his cringing tones.

Leopold turned on him, outraged and indignant.

"I believe none of this!" he said in a tone of sharp censure. "And if it is true, you should not have repeated it to me. The Princess Eleanora is the wife of Prince Christian, my Commander-in-Chief; and I do not know what manner of mischief you are trying to make with these base and vile insinuations. If you were dismissed the service of the Prince of Kurland," he added, with dignity, "I do not doubt he had his good and just reasons; and they would none of them touch the name of the Princess Eleanora."

Gabor was taken aback by this onslaught. He had, then, for all his cleverness, ill estimated his man. He had not believed that Leopold would take this tone; be so apt with the manner of Cæsar.

"Your Majesty, then, does not credit my tale?" he asked; "I have waited on you in the greatest soberness to relate to you facts which I thought it would be to your advantage to hear, and to your merit to consider. I am prone, supine in apology, in regret."

"I will listen to none of it!" cried Leopold, violently, but more agitated than became him. "I should not have seen you; I do not know why Hensdorff suggested that I *should* see you."

Ferdinand Gabor caught at that complaint.

"Count Hensdorff suggested that Your Majesty should see me because he can vouch for the truth of what I say. Question *him* as to the attitude of the Princess Eleanora on the eve of her forced marriage!"

"Forced?" stammered Leopold. "Forced?"

"She was forced," persisted Gabor. "Your Majesty rode away and allowed her to be forced." He ventured that, he was reckless.

"No more of this!" cried Leopold, in extreme dismay. "You must not mention these things, nor I listen to them. Prince Christian is my General—the Commander-in-Chief of my Army; and behind his back I cannot listen to gossip and scandal about him, and from the mouth of his dismissed spy."

"Spy!" exclaimed Gabor, bitterly stung. "Did Your Majesty say 'spy'?"

"Ay!" retorted Leopold, his blue eyes dark with rage, "I said 'spy'! And get you gone, Prince Gabor! I have no place for you in my service—not even in my service of the baser kind."

Gabor had not expected this defiance. He had thought that the weak and flighty Leopold would be an easy prey to his intrigue; a facile means to ruin Christian and Eleanora, one of whom had insulted him and the other of whom had been the witness of that insult; yes, it had not seemed difficult—the device of snaring these three in their passions.

And now he stood, dark and amazed, looking with anger at the Emperor.

"Get you gone!" cried Leopold trembling. "Never come into my presence again. And keep those names off your lips. Remember, if you speak of them, anywhere and anyhow, I shall hear of it; and when I hear I shall punish."

"Your Majesty," sneered Gabor, suavely, "carries matters with a very high hand. All I have said, I have said out of a wish to be of service to you. One of these days you may regret that you so dismissed me. If such a day comes, send for me, and I may be able to be of some use to you in your desires—your constant desires, Sire!"

"Insolence!" cried Leopold, beside himself. "Insolence! Get you gone, Prince Gabor, before I also strike you."

"No," smiled Gabor, his dark face very pale. "No!" he added, bowing, "there will be no need for that. I, Sire, am gone. But I do not think Your Majesty will be so easily able to forget what I have said—the news I brought and the picture I have evoked."

With that, he took himself gracefully from the room, bowing again as he went backwards through the tall, open door into the antechamber.

His bitter faded face did not change as he left the Hofburg, but there were many changes in his heart. He had not relinquished his scheme of revenge on Christian; but to the victims of that scheme of revenge he had added the Emperor; he rolled that title in mockery; Leopold and Christian should fall now, and fall together, if one man's wish and endeavours could make them; Eleanora, too, that artless chit, that frivolous puss who had been the cause of all this trouble: she should share their common ruin; all Gabor's world whirled into potent hatred of these three.

Already he had lit on a scheme that promised fairly to ripen to such an end; he thought that he could still catch these two men, fool and knave, in the springs of their own lusts and in this manner make them destroy each other. He was clever; he had some influence and some friends; he did not fear failure; he was experienced in this manner of intrigue, he knew all the devices of vileness.

Power!

They shouted for power, that hysterical weakling who claimed a throne, that flaunting base-born adventurer, but he could show who had the power; it would be the most amusing as well as the most gratifying thing he had ever accomplished to show them that, to prove to them what common clay they were and that he was their master, to snap his fingers at them and laugh in their faces at the end of this ironic little comedy.

Gabor walked lightly through the noble streets of Vienna, twisting towards the usual haunts of his kind, while his adroit and clear mind dexterously put together, link by link, the chain of circumstance that was to trip up and throw headlong the objects of his cold, implacable hate.

There were many Hapsburg flags in the city, many emblazonings of the Imperial Eagle; every time Gabor passed one of these he saluted the haughty emblem with icy mockery.

SEVENTEEN

MARÉCHAL DE LISLE welcomed Christian at Prague with every circumstance of respect and honour. He delighted to put everything in the hands of the Imperial Commander-in-Chief, and to defer to his judgment in every possible way. The Frenchman augured success from the fact that Christian had now the control of the fluctuating fortunes of Leopold, and looked forward with confidence to the ensuing campaign.

The two soldiers had known and liked each other well in Paris; they were friends of long standing, and Christian was at home with the native graces of the Frenchman; graces that glossed over all that was unpleasant, notably General Crack's own birth; that incurable wound the Germans always must probe.

There was never any hint, when he was in the company of De Lisle or the other French General, that he was any other than what, on the surface, he purported to be: a Prince, of unstained lineage, pure descent and blotless birth. They all gave him full honours, without any secret innuendoes, smile or sneer; he was in every way at home among the French; by education and taste himself a Frenchman.

Rapidity was the very heart of his plans, and he decided not to wait for Leopold, who lingered on the way from Vienna—as, Christian thought, he would always linger on the way from anywhere to anywhere. It was hardly in His Majesty's disposition to come directly to a given point.

Count Hensdorff had sent despatches, declaring the Emperor was on the way; but still he did not arrive, and weeks had gone by since Christian and his troop of Uhlans had left Ottenheim for their swift march to Prague.

It was true that the Allies had not moved either, and seemed most sluggish and reluctant to do so; it was true that

Christian had been able to work in many other ways—he had raised considerable levies, manœuvred large bodies of troops, and kept up communication with all the other Imperial generals: Spanish, Austrian, French and Italian.

But he wished to do more than this: he wished to make a definite advance on the Allied lines, and attack those great fortresses which protected the line of the Marne. Linz was with him, eager to be at work.

Christian was impatient to be at Brussels and Frankfurt, to see the crown put on Leopold's head; he was impatient to flick the Allies away from his path, impatient to be back at Ottenheim with Eleanora and the spring.

She had not written, and he was not for that greatly disappointed. He lived in his dreams—his ravishing dreams of the future. He could afford to wait: to wait yet longer; but not too long. And as the days passed one into another, he became more and more impatient that Leopold did not arrive in Prague.

"Advance without him!" suggested De Lisle; although he knew that this was a bad precedent, and most disheartening to the troops, as well as heartening to their enemies. "Surely Your Highness is sufficient; these men do not know or love Leopold. None of them, save the Bavarians, will miss him. In his father's lifetime he was not greatly regarded, nor do I think that he will make much of a reputation as a soldier."

"He will make a show," urged Christian; "he will be there—the Emperor, the symbol of what they are fighting for. I," he added with a smile, "am, after all, but a mercenary commander; a hired soldier, and not the man for whom these troops must shout."

"But why does he dally?" asked the Frenchman; and Christian wondered indeed why; he knew that Leopold was averse to camps and of no martial disposition, but it was hard to understand why he should linger in his distant capital, when all his fortunes were at stake on the front of war.

Christian had not thought the Bavarian without pride and dignity; Hensdorff's excuses were hollow. He said that

Leopold was ill; that the Archduchess was ill; that the heat was great in the capital; that the plague was rife; and such trivial evasions of the central fact that Leopold did not come to Prague.

The Princes and Electors gathered there began to comment upon his absence; not that they cared much, as long as Christian was in command, but they were inclined to feel themselves slighted. If they thought it worth while to come to Prague to meet Leopold, they thought he should have felt it worth his while to come to meet them.

Christian, so prompt and so energetic, so full of superb self-confidence, giving evidence every day of his powerful mind and his habit of full and supreme command, gained all the respect and admiration that Leopold missed while he stayed away; with the men, he had always been popular; and he now became, if not popular with the Princes, at least an object of their trust and confidence. Even the Germans were able to forget the slur upon his birth in trusting to his good qualities, his good fortune, and the obvious brilliancy of his destiny, to which they had now so definitely linked their various destinies.

Prince Frederic of Anhalt-Dessau, in particular, was pleased that he had attached himself to this triumphantly successful man, and wrote not infrequently to Eleanora, telling her how fortunate she was in such a husband, and bidding her send dutiful epistles to Prague. He was irritated that no heed was taken of his command, but appeased when the Duchess wrote and said that Eleanora was not wilful or sulky, but merely shy, and had attempted several letters to her husband which she had torn up.

"She has been trained, you know," the Duchess wrote, "in much; but never how to address a husband—or, indeed, any man. You kept her, you will remember, like a school-girl, and you must not be surprised if like a schoolgirl she now behaves."

Anhalt-Dessau would have liked to take these excuses to Christian, but as that Prince never mentioned his wife, Anhalt-Dessau did not care to do so either; Eleanora was

never named between them. But Christian always treated his father-in-law with a fine, if cold, deference—with an obvious, if mannered, respect.

By October he had mapped out every detail of the coming campaign; every detail of the coming battle. He was in touch with all the garrisons; he only waited for Olivenza and Guastalla to come up from Italy, to begin his movements, for though his very active, able and audacious preparations were now complete he wanted the Italian troops who still lingered so unaccountably on the way. He and De Lisle had resolved that Guastalla and Olivenza should, under one excuse or another, be dismissed their important commands when they reached Prague, so dilatory and languid had been their progress from Lombardy. They had under their command some of the best troops at the disposal of Leopold—the Black Cuirassiers, the Spanish Veterans, the Croats, and many of the heavy North Italian Cavalry.

"This is the pitch to which things have got," declared Christian at a Council of War. "These generals do not care whether they obey orders or no. For so long everything has been slackened that they do not ever believe it can be tightened again. But I, gentlemen, will wait no longer. I intend to advance on the enemies' lines. It is obvious that they hope to escape this season without any definite action, and to go into winter quarters avoiding battle, in the hope of another futile conference to amuse the winter months; and, in the spring, some manner of patched-up peace. But this is not my wish, nor, I think, gentlemen, yours. We want prompt action, and everything settled now and forever. Or," he added, with irony for his own statement, "if not forever, at least for a month or so."

He put before them his brief plan of campaign.

"The plan of campaign demands a superiority of troops on our part, the presence of the Emperor will augment this force; as the enemy is on the defensive and must keep his forts well garrisoned he will not be able to put many men into the field. I must insist on as much cavalry as possible—all the movements of the troops must be regulated by the

date at the general rendezvous at Tournay, where the Emperor will go by November 1; on the second a troop of cavalry will advance towards Mons, another towards Saint Ghislain; on the third, the Emperor, encamped at Maubeuge, will in two movements reach the river, where the bridges will have been prepared on the second; on the fourth Tournay will be invested; the heavy artillery will leave Douai on the fourth to arrive, the same day, at the park before Tournay; the heavy equipages of the Emperor will pass by Valenciennes and arrive on the sixth before Tournay, where the Emperor will establish his general quarters on the left of the Scheldt . . . *resolutions* to take Ath and Mons, keys of the Low Countries; these two places cannot hold out longer than seventeen to eighteen days—the first twelve or thirteen, the second three or five. I know both well, particularly Mons, where I was besieged four years ago; Ath I relieved with fifteen hundred men, under the orders of M. le Maréchal de Dauvet after the affair of Winterfeldt. . . .

“Mons, Tournay and Ath reduced, there will easily follow Quesnoy, Landrecies, Philippeville . . . Brabant will submit . . . one must note that there is only ten leagues from Mons to Brussels . . . needless to besiege Oudenarde as the Imperial Forces will occupy the Low Countries—these forts will surrender without a shot . . . as to Charleroi and Namur, it is not necessary to beleaguer them—they will be cut off and our line of communication solid forever; to keep their garrisons in order three posts will be needful, at Soignies, at Braine-le-Comte, at Notre Dame de Halle, occupied by grenadiers, dragoons and hussars.

“Nymwegen, absolutely the key of Holland, is only eleven miles from Utrecht, which is unfortified.”

The Frenchmen warmly agreed; they also did not wish to go into winter quarters without having furthered the Imperial Cause; the war had dragged on long enough, from their point of view; long, ponderous campaigns had been followed by long, dreary winters in foreign cities. They were anxious to have the whole dispute done with, and to

be able to return to Paris. Prague, Brussels, even Vienna—these were provincial cities to the Frenchmen, and they were weary of them.

Christian had now, encamped outside the walls of Prague, in an entrenchment four miles square, over a hundred thousand troops, besides the garrisons in the city; and he believed that this was a sufficient force with which to march upon the enemy, who, sluggish and doubtful, would not be prepared to meet him. They believed that his plan was the same as theirs—to dally and linger till the winter weather became too severe for the troops to remain in the field. Too severe for the Allies, perhaps; but Christian intended to fight through the winter.

It was, then, agreed to advance by forced marches on Dresden, then heavily garrisoned by Knittelfeldt for the Elector of Saxony. From Dresden, Anhalt-Dessau was to advance to his own little principality, and put that in a position of defence, while Christian's troops were to divide—some to go on to Berlin and some to stretch out at the left to Westphalia, Hanover, Nassau and the Palatinate; and so face the Allies on their own frontiers.

Fürth was holding the Palatinate with a considerable force, but he had lately sent to ask for reinforcements, and Christian was anxious above everything that he should have them. He was a long way from the main body of the army, and the position was most important; and though Christian did not think that the Allies would make any active attempt to dislodge him, he did not wish the Palatinate to be for a moment in jeopardy; nor did he greatly trust General Fürth.

On the eve of the departure of the Imperialists from Prague, Leopold came up from Vienna with Count Hensdorff and a small escort.

Prince Christian was glad to see him, and the two men met with every appearance of friendship and amiable courtesy in a room of the noble house where Leopold lodged. Christian, as a matter of form, coolly explained to His Majesty all his plans and all his preparations, asking, with a courteous indifference, if all this was agreeable to Imperial desires.

"The final decision," he added, "rests, of course, with Your Majesty."

And Leopold gave no hint that he saw the irony behind these words—no sign that he knew he was indeed a puppet in the hands of Hensdorff and of Christian, his able minister and his brilliant general.

Gravely he approved, gravely he commented; and at the finish declared himself, in conventional language, well satisfied with the industry and the genius of his Commander-in-Chief, with the superb organization of his troops, and with the dashing courage and magnificent sweep of the proposed daring, bold and yet prudent campaign suggested to him in those few dry words.

"Your Majesty," said Christian as if he commanded, "will no doubt wish to accompany the army. We had hoped for your presence sooner in Prague."

"I hope that has not delayed you," replied Leopold, with smiling coldness; "I have been indisposed, and so has the Archduchess. It was impossible for me to leave the capital sooner." He could not forbear finishing his sentence by saying: "I do not believe Your Highness has found my absence a very great drawback to the progress of your plans."

"No," replied Christian; "I have indeed been waiting for other things—for Guastalla and Olivenza to come up from Italy; they are an unaccountable time on the road, and I shall not delay any longer for them, but proceed at once to Dresden and Berlin, as here"—and he touched the papers between them—"I have pointed out to Your Majesty."

Leopold inclined his head; there was no more to be said. But he did not dismiss Christian, but stood looking at him thoughtfully.

For days Leopold had been dreading this interview, and he had only put it through by a strong effort of will; Christian could not guess what he had endured at Vienna, nor what it had cost Hensdorff and Father St. Nikola to urge him on this journey to Prague, to force him to take up the place they had decided he must fill.

He would have resigned, as he had often threatened to

resign, if he could have thought of any other means of living, of any possible retreat from the tumult of his grand and miserable life. But there was nowhere; he had remembered the monastery at M^ölk, as he had remembered the hermit's grotto above the ravine on the Danube; and he had remembered both with despair. Not in these places was any retreat to be found; he found that it was true enough that he who has not the courage to carry on his life in its appointed place has not the courage to escape. Much better to go on with some show of fortitude than wretchedly to desert. The Archduchess, too, had pleaded with him feverishly. She had asked him what *her* fate would be if he should resign the Crown. They had not Bavaria to which to retire; that was in the hands of the enemy. And if he deserted the cause of the French and the Imperialists, would they wrench back Bavaria for them? No! He could not resign from the Imperial purple to take up the robes of the Elector of Bavaria! He would be nothing—a mere, wandering adventurer; and what would *she* be, the delicate woman had asked. She who now had no father or mother—no other relatives; for whom there was no husband, no protector in prospect. What would she be, if she was not the Archduchess Maria Luisa, the sister of the Emperor?

And it had seemed to Leopold that he could not think of resigning till, at least, he had provided for her; while she and her fortunes were dependent on him, he was not free; and so he had finally, and after infinite pain and inward struggles, braced himself to play his part, and here he was now in this dark alien room in Prague, facing Christian; in his handsome uniform, all besilvered and bespangled with gold and silver cord, with stars and medals and silken sashes, with his hat plumed and set jauntily, with his side curls powdered and one of the crown diamonds, a solitaire, in his black ribbon: here he was playing the Emperor, and trying to stare down Christian of Kurland, who looked at him with that inscrutable, masklike, too handsome face which he had learned to know and hate so well.

He felt confidence enough in the superb and insolent

soldier; no doubt Christian would set him on the throne—no doubt he would have to give him Kurland and other places as a reward, as well as the reward he had already given him. And still he stared at Christian, not dismissing him, but allowing him to stand there, bareheaded, superb and indifferent, awaiting his pleasure.

If he was the master, or going to pretend to be the master, to play the part of master, at least he would sometimes have a master's privileges; and so he stood there, making Christian wait his command.

And then Christian spoke, in his soft voice, with his very courtly air:

"I hope Your Majesty left the Archduchess recovered of her sickness?" he asked; he too stared.

And Leopold flushed; it seemed to him an insolence for Christian to take this name in his speech; and he answered, stiffly:

"Her Highness is very well, I thank you." And, as a counterthrust, he added, haughtily: "You have left the Princess Eleanora safe in Ottenheim?"

He had not thought that he would have been able to mention this name, but, because Christian had spoken of his sister, the sister he had slighted and refused, Leopold found it easy to mention Eleanora, a name that had been continuously in his heart, but not on his lips since the day he had ridden away from the Château of Schönbuchel in Dürsheim.

"She is well and safe," replied Christian; "I have frequent news of her."

"Tell her," said Leopold, "when you write again, that I remember my brief visit to Dürsheim; and beg her to accept my humble duties. I did not yet send her a wedding gift, but that shall not be forgotten."

He spoke, not only in defiance of Christian, but in defiance of himself, of his own pain and shame and remorse, of his own bitter and insistent memories.

But Christian knew nothing of this; he was unaware that Eleanora meant anything to Leopold—that she ever had

meant anything but a pawn in the game he was playing. There had been many rumours as to the probable marriage of the Emperor; many women's names had been mentioned, and most people had forgotten by now that one of the first of these names, only a few weeks ago, had been that of Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau: so quickly does time pass in intrigue and war, when men's minds are disturbed by increasing tumult of heavy events.

Christian, of course, remembered, but attached no importance to the memory. He thought that Leopold spoke so because he meant to flatter him, and bowed, accepting the flattery as part of the bargain between him and Leopold of Bavaria.

"Will Your Majesty review the troops to-morrow?" he asked. "I wish to start immediately."

"I think there is no need for me to review them," answered Leopold, icily, "since no doubt Your Highness has done so."

"There is every need for Your Majesty to show yourself to the men," said Christian, "and I shall be greatly indebted if you will review them to-morrow morning."

It was more like a command than a request, and so Leopold took it. But still he would not say "Yes" and dismiss Christian, but kept him standing there, staring him down.

Leopold made a fine figure now; his essential weakness was disguised; he looked handsome, imposing, grand, in all the cunning and judicious fripperies of his array; in all the glitter of his stars and orders, in the sparkle of the diamonds on his sword-hilt, at his throat and on his bosom. If he was not an emperor, he made a very good symbol of an emperor; a show, a pageant, enough to satisfy the unthinking. And so Christian regarded him, and with indifferent approval; he had no feeling for Leopold but one of friendly contempt. He was quite unaware that Leopold hated him; and he was incapable of hating Leopold; but he could not resist a faint smile that broke his famous composure when Leopold asked him to come to his table that night for supper. For he remembered the day in Belgrade, at the camp, when

Leopold, then only King of the Romans, had invited all the other generals to his tent and omitted Prince Christian of Kurland. Now he was not only asked, but asked as if acceptance would be an honour.

Leopold saw that smile, and knew what it meant; and he smiled too, to cover his humiliation.

"At supper we will talk further, Your Highness," he remarked. "No doubt you will like to speak to Count Hensdorff. He keeps public affairs better in mind than I can do; he is my memory and my conscience, Highness; as such regard him."

"An able and a courageous man," said Christian. "I respect Count Hensdorff; and in matters of politics, for which I care, as a rule, not a fig, I shall put myself unreservedly in his hands. Your Majesty, no doubt, does not care to be fatigued with such prosaic details."

And Leopold could not yet let him go, but must stand there and gaze at him, and reconstruct in his mind that scene that Gabor had told him—the Princess Eleanora speaking to the Transylvanian, under those beech trees where he had seen her with her strawberry basket and her dreams, between those hornbeam hedges at Dürsheim, in the mellow evening sunshine; speaking to the Transylvanian, and appealing to him against her fate; against Christian, this man who stood here now so grand, so impressive, so cool and splendid. And, dwelling on that scene as Gabor had told it to him, he could not resist asking:

"Is it true that you have dismissed from your service the Transylvanian, Ferdinand Gabor?"

Christian was taken by surprise; but he was well schooled in never showing surprise, and he answered indifferently: "Sire, it is quite true. I found him to be a villain."

"But I thought," said Leopold, "that you had always known him to be a villain."

"Some sort of a villain, no doubt," agreed Christian; "but I found him to be a villain in another manner—an intolerable one to me, Your Majesty. Yes, I have dismissed him."

"And he came to me in Vienna and wished to have employment."

"Your Majesty might do worse than give it him," smiled Christian; "he is a most useful, subtle and adroit manner of scoundrel, and well versed in all kinds of intrigue."

"I refused him," remarked Leopold, coldly, "because he spoke ill of you."

Christian was again surprised, and again did not show surprise.

"Your Majesty is very courteous," he replied. "But for me, I take no account of what dismissed servants may say."

"I took no account either, and therefore did not engage him; but I wondered what his offence had been."

"He did not tell you, I suppose?" asked Christian.

"He merely said that you had struck him," answered Leopold. "Impossible, surely, but he said you had struck him."

"And so I did strike him," said Christian, coolly; "but for what reason I have forgot."

And they stared at each other across the darkening room, where, in the stillness, was a sense of mute gathering conflict.

"I have forgot," repeated Christian, "and let not Your Majesty trouble your mind about such a detail as Gabor."

He spoke now with some meaning, and Leopold believed he knew what was behind this speech, and that on his lips was the name of Eleanora; on his lips and in his heart, but never to be breathed or spoken between them. It was impossible for him, Leopold, to get behind the guard of a man like this. He must go on; play his part and wait his time.

At last he dismissed Christian, saying:

"I am sure Your Highness has many affairs to attend to; and as for me, I will rest a little, having," he added, with bitter irony, "nothing else to do."

When Christian had left him, he stood motionless in his tricked-up magnificence, staring at the spot where Christian had faced him, as if he still defied that resplendent figure.

EIGHTEEN

PRINCE GABOR leaned from an upper window in a main street in Berlin, and watched the gaudy, transient stars of the fireworks break among the clear, immortal planets. The night was brilliant, flushed with the first frost of the winter; Gabor was glad of the cool, sweet air on his face. He had been smoking and drinking all day; his attire was dishevelled. Though ironically decorous in public, often in private he amused himself with low debaucheries. Though dismissed from the service of Christian, and rejected by Leopold, he had found work, and congenial work, with Count Hensdorff, who could not bring himself to reject the services of one so able, in his own peculiar way, as Ferdinand Gabor. It was largely owing to his underground influence and subtle intrigue that the King of Prussia had been induced to support the Imperial cause; and with him had come a whole train of lesser German potentates to strengthen the army of Leopold.

The name and prestige of General Crack, the soldier who had never lost a battle nor failed to take a town, had rendered Gabor's task an easy one. All the German princelings were eager to be on the winning side, and they believed that the winning side would be that championed by Christian. Also, they were much impressed and flattered by his joining the Lutheran faith and marrying the heiress to so many of their admired dignities.

Yet, without Gabor and his spies and agents, the work would have been longer. He had been of considerable value to Hensdorff; but Hensdorff had had to keep his services secret, knowing that he was out of favour with Leopold and in disgrace with Christian. The reason of these double dislikes Hensdorff did not enquire into; he accepted them

with a shrug and a sneer. Christian could be violent, and Leopold was capricious; Hensdorff was neither: he took any instrument for any end, as it suited his judgment and his aims.

Gabor was well paid, both to do his work and to keep in the background. He lounged now from the upper window, feeling that the triumphs of this evening were largely due to his endeavours. Without him—the concealed, the despised man—this triumph would have lost something of its gloss.

A pageantry was passing through the narrow street below, a street picked out into fantastic shapes by the crossing of lights and shadows; lights of lanterns, of flambeaux, of torches, of fireworks; shadows of houses, of people, of masses of people passing to and fro, in and out alley and square. Gabor, from his high-placed gable, could see over the town, black spires rising into the falsely illuminated gloom of the night. He liked to see the rockets swing up, break and expire; he thought of General Crack as he stared sarcastically at the vault of the heavens, where these transient glories of sparkling colour so brightly flashed and so immediately disappeared.

The Imperial Forces were entering the capital of Prussia with all the splendour of a royal welcome. Gabor could see them passing below. There was all the clatter and bravery of the Uhlans and Cuirassiers, the Poles and Saxons, the Kurlanders and Pomeranians; all the bold, wanton train of them, flushed with hope, almost with certainty of success; proud and impatient, they passed between the narrow houses with mean-lit windows. The King of Prussia was there, with his own picked troops; a slight young man, who stooped, whose uniform wrinkled on his shoulders, who made no great show. A cleverer man, though, thought Gabor, than either Leopold or Christian, or even Hensdorff; a reddish, foxy slip of a man, with his eye on success.

"What a show!" sneered Gabor, hanging out of the window with his pipe in his mouth. "What a show even a poor laggard fool can make with stars and crosses and ribbons, bedecked, besilvered and adorned!" He spoke of Leopold,

who rode on a great white horse, and held himself with an air of rigorous pride.

The young man achieved, indeed, an Imperial appearance in his showy uniform, his beplumed hat, the stars that glittered on his breast—in the whole magnificence of the collar of The Golden Fleece, his silken sashes, the imposing appointments that adorned his graceful youth, he made a figure to impress the populace.

Leopold was affable, too; he had those easy and pleasant graces that never fail to receive a vague but general admiration. Both the people of the baser sort gathered in the street and those who looked from adorned windows admired the young Emperor, who knew how to beam elegantly from his saddle, and smile and salute; whose blue eyes looked with amiable majesty at the adoring crowd, whose face was so elegant and comely, whose blushes did not unbecome his manly modesty.

He rode before a troop of resplendent horsemen; nothing was lacking to give the extreme of glittering pomp to his retinue; he seemed himself elated by the glories that surrounded him—as if he were already a conqueror, already robbed and crowned at Frankfurt or Aix-la-Chapelle.

“Ay!” sneered Gabor, as he watched the noble and charming figure disappear into the interlaced shadows of the prepared road, “ay! To-day you seem the sum of all the graces. You are a brave show to make the people shout; but to-morrow, and the day after to-morrow, and next week, my fine young man—”

He folded his arms on the window sill, and smiled to himself—smiled with real pleasure and satisfaction, not in the contemplation of all this careful and imposing pomp, but in the thought of how soon it would be snuffed out like a smear of dust, which is all that is left from a pinched candle flame. Behind Leopold rode Prince Christian, at the head of his own Uhlans. Keenly Gabor gazed at that familiar and now loathed figure; in this hour of outward triumph, Christian appeared the same as he had appeared in his choicest, quietest leisure—unmoved and unregardful

of anything but his own pride; how Gabor detested that pose, so difficultly achieved, so carefully maintained! General Crack appeared a man without passions; Gabor, who knew so differently, hated him for the mute arrogance with which he preserved his cold equanimity.

Beneath those cold, frosty skies, gemmed with planets and flared with fireworks, which rose above the dark steeples and the clustered gables, General Crack rode. Gabor noted the precise neatness of his appearance—the trim coat, the exact cravat, the carefully arranged scarves and badges, the glittering of the foreign orders on his breast, the tassels of his gloves, the exact fit of his boots, all the gleams and polish and wrought delicacies of his horse's harness.

"How many hours have you spent with the tailor and the barber?" sneered Gabor. "And to what end, eh? All this careful parade is but so much lavish waste to hide the man you are. But I will make you betray yourself!"

He leant far out on the window ledge and for a brief second's space he saw the countenance of Christian turn upwards, attracted by some glare in an upper window—by some delicate voice, some woman's voice, acclaiming him; and Gabor looked down at him, at the dark, cold face, so precisely set off by plume and curl.

"I'll blast your shining face," he smiled; "I'll blast it for you!"

General Crack rode on indifferently. He had not seen Gabor—was not thinking of Gabor nor likely to think of him again. To him this was all nothing but a marking of time; he was eager to be in action. His reception in Berlin was but an episode on the way. He glanced round carelessly, and heard the people shouting for Leopold, and he was gratified. This was part of his task—to make people shout for Leopold. And with the same calm indifference he regarded the figure riding ahead of him, and approved that agreeable display. Hensdorff had taken his advice; Leopold was making an Imperial appearance; that was all that Christian asked.

The rest he could leave, he believed, to his own well-tuned

destiny. He rode on out of the sight of Gabor, and soon all the soldiers had passed, and left the street empty.

But the fireworks continued to rise from the market square, and Gabor remained at his window, watching these, flying up high, making their brief and violent display of clustered blue and purple constellations, then vanishing into nothingness.

Prince Gabor had, with a cold heart and an unscrupulous mind, a great deal of subtlety and delicacy in his perceptions. He could judge—more than judge, he could understand—the finest feelings of better men than himself, feelings that he despised. He could read Christian. He remembered Eleanora in the woods at Dürsheim—how soft and warm and foolish that girl, with her knot of light hair, her frail muslin bodice straining across her bosom; a muslin bodice so easily unlaced, a knot of light hair so easily tumbled down!

Almost he had, cold and jaded as he was, almost he had desired her himself, as both Christian and Leopold had desired her; he knew that now; it had been underlying his pursuit of her, his compliments, his bowings and bendings, his insinuations into her confidence; and she had felt it, and drawn back—felt it without knowing what it was. Well, Christian held her now. Gabor thought of that, and licked his lip where there was a little scar where Christian had struck him: struck him in front of her; he could remember her face, her expression of horror and contempt. She had seen him struck; well, she would see some one else struck: Gabor meant to bring them both down; he revelled in the sense of power that thought gave him—to bring them both down.

He was an adept at procuring information by backstair means; following with Hensdorff in the train of Leopold and Christian, unseen by them but always spying on them, he knew pretty well both the actions and the mind of his late employer.

Herr Lippmann had told him something; Lippmann was never averse to gossip. He had found out things from

servants, even from Christian's servants. The girl had been left alone on her bridal night. Christian had visited her; yes, for half an hour, fully dressed in his uniform, all but his sword and belt; he had given her the green diamond called Mitau and left her, not disturbing her maiden heart by any declarations of love, not troubling her untarnished fidelity with any protestations of faith. His wish had been short of his desire; wrapped in fantastical dreams of love, he had left love itself to slumber till the appointed time, hoarding up in his heart the anticipation of all life's sweet pleasure to come; waiting until he had the leisure to rouse in his lady mutual answering fires.

Gabor could understand all this; understand the fineness and delicacy of the inmost recesses of Christian's soul: those costly diamonds, and the leaving of her . . .

"He'll win the war and go back to her," sneered Gabor; "he's to fight and conquer, and she, his best of dears, is to wait for him. How much would Leopold give to know that—that she is there, a maiden, waiting for love! That would give his pride's aspiring some good object for its goal! That would enlarge his narrow wish—to think that sparkling beauty waits for his gathering."

A little chill wind blew out of the brilliant night sky, and fanned the heated forehead of Gabor. He put out his hands as if this wind were a substance, and he could weigh it in his palm.

"Light wind, light air," he smiled, "and her heart more light than either! What will she do in Ottenheim? It will not be of Christian she will think. It was that fair fool that took her fancy."

Gabor yawned and stretched; then, dishevelled as he was, went down into the town, where all the houses were lit, where all the people were lively and excited by the entry of the Imperial Army; by the gathering in their city of so many notables, by the presence of the Emperor himself.

Everywhere there were flags and wreaths, and still the rockets rose from the market place. Gabor went to the palace, to the back door, where he always found ready ad-

mittance in any palace; he had his agents everywhere. How excited every one was! How they boasted and shouted!

"The campaign is not begun yet," remarked Gabor. He sought out Banning, who had kept on good terms with one who might be either useful or very dangerous, according to the case. Banning did not know or care why he had been disgraced; it was not so unusual for Christian to dismiss his attendants or to change his officers.

The Swede was elated by the pomp and splendour of the entry into Berlin, by this notable gathering of all the potentates that had come to serve under the Eagles, and again Gabor sneered:

"The campaign is not yet begun."

"But we know," grinned Banning, "how it will end."

"I wonder," remarked Gabor, "if you do!"

He turned the conversation onto Princess Christian, as he spitefully named Eleanora.

"Why doesn't he bring her here? Other women are flocking—the Archduchess Maria Luisa and the Countess Carola Borgonie, they are coming to-morrow, I hear—agog for the show."

"He keeps her apart," smiled Banning; "he keeps her for himself. She is for him alone, you understand, not even to be glimpsed from common eyes."

"He did not use to be so nice," commented Gabor, ironically. "This lady seems to have fairly caught him."

The Swede answered that he could see very little in his master's wife. She seemed to him a foolish little thing—just plump and pretty, and no more; scared if you looked at her. "Not the sort of creature that you would expect a man like Christian to pay such a price for, eh?"

And they gossiped about her and about Christian, going over his leaving of her in Ottenheim, the installation of the old Duchess, the altering of the apartments, the taking away of the pictures of seductive ladies and coquettish nymphs; and they laughed and mocked together at the forbearance of Christian towards this treasured prize.

Banning coarsely put down Christian as a man besotted

and infatuate; but Gabor, with his more subtle conceptions, knew better. He could enter into all the involved delicacies of Christian's behaviour; but he pretended that he took Banning's point of view, and jeered crudely at the behaviour of the man he detested, for this gave him a certain pleasure.

"They are banqueting now," remarked Banning, "he and Leopold, under a canopy, he with the Emperor on one side and the King of Prussia on the other. What do you say to that?"

"I say," replied Gabor, "that it must be a very amusing spectacle."

Presently, when it was late in the festival, Gabor crept into the music gallery of the banqueting room, unobserved in his plain civilian dress behind the liveried musicians of the King of Prussia; the continuous light music fell like a veil between him and the scene in the spick, new, brilliant room below; yes, there they were under the dais, glittering together, surrounded by gorging, flushed princes. Gabor's sharp scrutiny observed some dispatches handed to a lackey at the door, passed from hand to hand and finally reaching Leopold, where he was pledging his Allies, rising, with his glass in his hand. Leopold nervously tore open the letters and had not sufficient self-control to conceal the disastrous contents; he read a passage aloud. In a second it was round the room that the Emperor had received bad news; in a moment it was round the room that both Guastalla and Olivenza had been defeated, one by the Hungarians, the other by the English. Gabor, standing secretly in the recesses behind the muted orchestra, rubbed his hands and licked his lips.

NINETEEN

LEOPOLD stood at bay, with the fatal dispatches in his hand; the moment had utterly overwhelmed him; his humiliation was extreme. He was abashed, not so much by the extent of the disaster, as by his own powerlessness to meet this same disaster. From the first moment that the papers had been put into his hands he had done the wrong thing.

Already agitated, and at the limit of nervous tension, he had not possessed the presence of mind to glance at the news and put the dispatches in his pocket, setting aside with a smile the disastrous communications until a proper moment for their revelation to the proper people.

"This news would have kept," the King of Prussia had remarked, more angry with Leopold's reception of the letters than with what the letters had contained. To every one Leopold had betrayed his essential weakness; he felt sick and disheartened; he did not know what to say or do to put a gloss upon this ugly moment. He glanced round at consternated and vexed faces; he heard disturbed mutterings and scornful whisperings; he looked at Hensdorff and saw the gloom upon that minister's tired countenance; he looked at his Commander-in-Chief and saw the soldier's superb, supreme indifference, which seemed to mask a faint amusement, for Christian sat immobile—his expression had not changed; he offered no comment; he alone, of all about the sumptuous table, had nothing to say; his fine hands played with the sparkling stem of his wineglass, but he drank no wine.

A pause; Leopold began to stammer. Half turning in his seat, he tried to make excuses to the King of Prussia, who was making his bread into pellets and nervously flicking them across the tablecloth.

"Guastalla and Olivenza both?" murmured Leopold. "This takes me by surprise."

"Whom, Sire," asked the King of Prussia, "are those dispatches from? Strange that you should get ill news," he added, with a wry smile, "in this double dose!"

"I do not know," replied Leopold, confusedly. "I will recall the messenger."

But the King of Prussia interposed:

"Surely, Sire, we have had enough of this for the moment," he suggested grimly. "The rest of the matter may wait till we have finished our dinner."

Leopold blushed, and loathed himself for blushing; he had been rebuked by the King of Prussia—he, the Emperor! The moment was bitter on his lips; the flavour was acrid in his nostrils; he cast his eyes down; the glitter and sparkle of The Golden Fleece and the diamonds and gold stars and crosses on his bosom further vexed and humiliated him; he felt a painted puppet, for all men to stare and mock at; the fringes of the purple canopy, even the gilded Imperial Crown above them, seemed to him like so many ridiculous, trifling toys, set up to bait him. And, apart from this sense of personal failure, even of personal degradation, his mind was full of the ghastly pictures evoked by those brief lines.

"Cut to pieces like sheep," one of the sentences read. And Leopold could not think Imperially; he could not think of the loss to the cause or to the Empire; his fastidious mind must go over the horrible details of slaughtered men, even of slaughtered horses; of all those dead and dying, maimed and stricken, calling out against him, cursing him for whom they died. . . . The dark picture haunted him, oppressed him, even more than those disturbed and slightly contemptuous faces of all his generals, marshals and princes there gathered to condemn his folly and his weakness.

The King of Prussia lapsed into silence, his narrow face overcast; he had nothing more to say to the Emperor; but he was thinking rapidly.

Count Hensdorff spoke to the man next him, talking about the inefficiency of Guastalla, of the incompetence of Olivenza;

then the King of Prussia, rousing himself from sour reflection as to whether or no he had, after all, chosen the wrong side, made an angry signal for the orchestra to recommence; and from the musicians' gallery, where Gabor in his shadow watched and mocked, floated out a thin, melting dance melody across the low hubbub of agitated conversation from the ruined festival below.

And still General Crack said nothing, nor seemed in the least disturbed; only his dark glance travelled round and round the table secretly, watching all those flushed and agitated faces; and always they came back, those dark, keen eyes, to Leopold on his Imperial dais, just a step higher than even kings and princes; Leopold, under the scrolling of the gaudy magnificence of the Imperial Diadem. Once the Bavarian caught that quiet, that almost ironic, glance; a glance that was judging and condemning him for failure; that was sneering at his weakness. Why could he not have concealed those dispatches? Why, rather, had they all forced him into this position that he did not want, that he could not fill?

Leopold could have cried out in protest before them all, and flung down these tawdry and flimsy dignities, the meaningless, gaudy honours that they poured on him for their own ends—not for his! Only because they could not find another man to fill the odious position of figurehead.

His gaze fell to his hands, and he noted how they shook behind the lace points; he noticed, too, how The Golden Fleece, all diamonds, steel and gold, glittering on his bosom rose and fell, sparkled and flashed with the tumultuous beating of that heart he could not control. Every one must be seeing it as he saw it himself; he was a target for all their glances of displeasure.

The supper was over; the gorgeous gathering broke up; there was talk of a Council of War; but Leopold said, nervously: "Not to-morrow!"

Even as he made this evasion, he knew that they would hold their Council without him.

They all went their way through the awakened town to

their quarters and palaces, and Leopold himself returned slowly to the apartment reserved for him in the King's house. An elegant *berline* had brought his sister and a bevy of ladies from Vienna; Leopold heard with dislike their thin, chattering voices rising from their rooms, discussing this ill news which had so soon leapt from mouth to mouth. He did not want to see any of them: he was vexed by the nervous whim of Maria Luisa which had urged her to refuse to remain alone in the capital; vexed by the coquettish pursuit of the Countess Carola, who could not understand that she no longer charmed him. If they had arrived a little earlier, they too would have been at his banquet, witnesses of his discomfiture; and he would have had to endure afterwards his sister's reproaches and the Countess Carola's encouragement. But the roads had been bad, and they were late; even now they were only unpacking their baggage and rearranging their rooms, with the noisy help of maids and servants.

But Leopold did not hope to be free of every one. In the sullen expectation of the company of both Hensdorff, Father St. Nikola and possibly the King of Prussia, he waited in his anteroom all painted with peacocks and lily flowers, flourishing and twining on a gilt background that they had given him in which to house his hollow pomp.

Neither Hensdorff nor the King of Prussia asked for an audience: they had their own urgent matters to attend to; the affairs of both had been considerably changed by the news received during the banquet.

Hensdorff was gathering all the details of the two defeats; and the King of Prussia was considering how to repair them: while Leopold waited alone in his quiet room. Father St. Nikola also left Leopold in peace; he was a man of infinite tact; he had seen his master's face, and knew that this was no good moment either for consolation or reproach. He had heard already that the Emperor had made no great show at table, when he had received the news, and he blamed—like the man of the world he was—the breakdown in etiquette and general management which had permitted

a man like Leopold to be publicly handed bad news; bah, one didn't expose a man like that!

But though these three stayed away from his gorgeous little apartment, Leopold was not alone; the man whom he least wished to see, Prince Christian, demanded an audience. And although the ready blood stormed Leopold's brow when he heard this name, he could not refuse to see his Commander-in-Chief at such a moment.

Christian had said nothing at the banqueting table; he had, therefore, most likely the more to say now.

Leopold walked up and down the room nervously, struggling hard for something of that same superb composure, that serene indifference, with which his general always affronted him.

Christian entered without haste; he did not seem in the least disturbed. Even that keen scrutiny with which he had glanced round the supper table was veiled. He kept his gaze off Leopold.

He was trim and neat, almost foppish, to the last detail. He flicked a speck of dust from his bullion-encrusted cuff, and carefully placed on a malachite side table his soldier's hat clasped with a panache of clipped white ostrich plumes.

"We must," declared Leopold, with what grandeur he could command, "find out the details of these disasters."

"Sire," replied Christian, "I already know them. Captain Nordling, who brought those dispatches, had them delivered to him by two separate messengers, one of whom rode fast, the other of whom was delayed. Therefore at one moment he received them. He was ill-advised, Sire, as to the time of deliverance of them to Your Majesty."

Leopold had to endure this flick at his pride.

"What are these details?" he said, still pacing up and down the room.

"Of no importance," remarked Christian. "Olivenza was taken by surprise, Guastalla was outmanœuvred. They are both incapable men."

He gave the last two words a light stress.

"There are," replied Leopold, bitterly, "many incapable

men in my service; it will be the duty of Your Highness to replace them with others."

"I wish," said Christian, coldly, "that I had been permitted to replace these two generals before they had brought this misfortune on us, a number of stout fellows have been lost by the negligence of these two poltroons: to say nothing of a fine train of artillery, and a considerable loss of prestige."

Leopold did not answer. He pulled at the rich laces which hung on his breast below the pompous glitter of The Golden Fleece, and stood by the dark curtains that shrouded the window; the very summer air oppressed him; his nerves were like a bow unstrung.

Christian looked at him directly as he spoke again.

"There must be an end of this," he remarked, with quiet but immeasurable arrogance. "I cannot undertake to repair the fortunes of Your Majesty as long as you employ these wavering, vain and flourishing men. It was some days ago my advice," he continued, "that these generals should be recalled."

"Advice impossible for me to act upon," cried Leopold, hotly. "They are great nobles of whom you speak, and held command under my father."

"And for that reason," replied Christian, "Your Majesty's Imperial father was not so successful as his supporters would have wished."

"It is not given to every soldier," replied Leopold, "to be victorious."

"It is given to every soldier," said Christian, "and to every man to make the most of opportunity. These men should be broken . . . should be cashiered. It is sufficient condemnation that they are both in safety," he added, with a flashing look. "That each has lost his army and is in safety, Sire!"

Leopold replied, briefly:

"I cannot inflict any further disgrace on two men already severely punished."

"And I," countered Christian, "will not have such generals under me."

"You take a high tone," said the Emperor.

"I take a high place," replied Christian, eyeing him straightly.

Implacable, inflexible, and always with that air of faintly ironical amusement, he stood at his ease and eyed the Emperor.

"I take a high place," he repeated; "and I have sworn to put Your Imperial Majesty in a yet higher place. This cannot be done if I am hampered by fools."

Leopold did not reply. He thought he could hear murmurs in the street below—angry and disloyal murmurs; tumult of disgust; confusions of disillusion; perhaps already he was not so popular.

"I have also to remind Your Majesty," continued the even voice of General Crack, "that these misfortunes are the result of delay. These two men have been allowed to linger with excuses and evasions. They have been months on marches that should have been a matter of weeks; and here we pay for these vain lingerings."

Leopold breathed heavily, pulled out his handkerchief, and pressed it to his dry lips.

"You yourself," continued Christian; "Sire, you yourself have also delayed. We are everywhere weeks behind my design. I from the first have urged action, and there has been no action; even now we have not our men in the field. Banquetings and triumphant entries would better become Your Majesty at the conclusion, not at the commencement, of the campaign."

"What do you mean?" breathed Leopold, distractedly.

"I mean that we waited in Prague too long for Your Majesty. There was no excuse, Sire, for those long delays in your coming from Vienna, and I would advise Your Majesty that the next time I will not wait for your Imperial presence. I would not have waited this time," he added, coolly, "but that I thought it an ill example for the troops

that you should dally away time in the capital while they took the field."

"This," whispered Leopold, "is insolence."

"This," replied Christian, "is truth and common sense. I have indeed engaged to do a certain work; but I have not engaged to do it with my hands tied."

"You have full powers," Leopold nervously reminded him. "I do not know what more you ask!"

"I want leave to exercise those same powers. I want to warn Your Majesty—"

This word was more than Leopold could endure with patience.

"Warn me? Of what do you wish to warn me, Prince Christian? Of your possible disloyalty?"

Unmoved, Christian cast off the insult.

"There is no question of loyalty between you and me, Sire," he replied. "I am a mercenary soldier whom you have engaged, whose services you have paid for."

Leopold turned away resentfully at this reference to an obnoxious theme.

"If you admit yourself a mercenary," he asked, sharply, "what guarantee have I that you will not behave as one? What guarantee have I that I can rely upon your services?"

"My word," replied Christian temperately. "I have never been known to prefer my interest to my honour."

Leopold paused in his nervous walk, and looked his Commander-in-Chief curiously up and down.

"Ah!" he said, "your word; I have, then, your word? You will serve me whatever happens?"

"Certainly," said Christian; "what need is there to speak of that? I have sworn to see you crowned, Sire; but do not," and he faintly smiled, "make my task too difficult. I am already hampered by this double defeat."

"But you have sworn," insisted Leopold, breathing quickly, in fierce extremes of considerable agitation. Again he played with his ruffled laces, and all the solid insignia of his unstable honours above his giddy heart. "Whatever happens,

you are sworn to me. My armies, my people and my destiny—all are entrusted to you."

"Certainly I have sworn," repeated Christian, "whatever happens. But from now on," he added, "I will see that nothing *does* happen to hinder me. I have my reasons, Sire, for wishing the campaign at an end."

Leopold put his hand to his sick head; he knew the reason; he knew that Christian wanted to return to that girl safely shut away in Ottenheim.

"Yes," he said, "you have had your reward, but you have not enjoyed it."

Christian ignored this.

"Have I leave," he demanded, "to punish Guastalla and Olivenza?"

Leopold sat down weakly before a tall mirror, wreathed with garlands of roses and loops of ribbons which seemed to flutter, so light they were; he looked reproachfully at his own charming and bedizened person.

"No!" he said, with his back to the other man.

TWENTY

THE sound of his own denial strengthened Leopold; though he gazed with contempt at his own gorgeous image in the gaudy mirror and knew that his own white look of weakness unmasked his external pomp, still he was encouraged by the sound of his own denial.

"No!" he repeated.

Christian took no heed of this; he seemed about to take his leave. He made a gesture towards his hat on the side table; then his hand dropped again, and he looked in silence at the Emperor.

Leopold saw in the glass the hateful dazzle of the diamonds on The Golden Fleece, and on the hilt of his State sword, which Hensdorff had carefully sent from Vienna for this entry into Berlin; he impetuously disencumbered himself of these glowing fripperies, sword and Golden Fleece, and flung them down. The brilliant collar and the resplendent weapon lay side by side on the marble table beneath the mirror.

"Your Majesty," remarked Christian, quietly, eyeing him, "shows some nicety of judgment. Those gauds are more for a conqueror's wear."

Leopold did not reply. He rose abruptly, went to the window, and pulled back the heavy damask curtains upon the clear, frosty night. All was silent without now; the tumult had vanished into utter peace; the people were withdrawn into their homes; a pellucid sky was innocent of the raucous stain of fireworks.

"I," remarked Christian, "have bidden these people go home, and save their powder and their hurrahs, both of which will be more appropriate later."

Leopold leant against the frame of the tall window in what seemed a mood of cold, careless apathy. Christian

still waited as if expecting him to say or do something of a certain importance; but Leopold, when he at last did begin to speak, spoke to little purpose.

"Everything is tainted," he remarked, "all so stale and tarnished. I can put no heart into any of it. All that troubles me now is the thought of those men who have wretchedly perished—for what?—for me, who am nothing; for my cause, which is nothing too. Everything is tainted!" and in his mind, and almost on his lips, he bitterly added: "All except that girl you've snatched from me and have safely hidden with your other plunder in Ottenheim!" Plunder of war, booty of conquest: that was what she was; by no other right did Christian hold her; his unwilling victim.

Christian regarded Leopold with sincere indifference; he had no cause to hate him or to be jealous of him. He was utterly ignorant of the passions that tormented Leopold; he did not know that he had ever gazed with love on Eleanora. Nor did Christian wish to depreciate the man whom he had sworn to exalt: it would have pleased him better if the Emperor had made a better display and put a finer gloss on the matter; he was even slightly vexed that Leopold showed so much weakness, and he lingered now in the doubtful hope that in some way Leopold would retrieve his character and display some decision.

"Sire," he exclaimed, "this is no time for shreds and scraps of philosophy. I know not if the world is better or worse than ever it was or ever will be; but it is my world, and I must live in it and make the best of it. Now, as to Guastalla and Olivenza—"

"As to them," said Leopold, quickly and even vehemently, "let them go. I do not know the whole tale; any general is liable to misfortune, and defeat."

"And any general is liable to be court-martialled and cashiered," remarked Christian, quietly. "As for not knowing—the matter of the case—I have a fair idea. Since the banquet I have been able to discover what occurred."

Leopold did not wish to hear; he had no academic interest in the plans of war, though his Jesuit governor had

done the best that ability and enthusiasm could do to instruct him in mathematics and engineering and tactics.

But General Crack was quietly explaining to him: "Olivenza, coming up from Lombardy, crossed the Tyrol and was defeated on the banks of the Lech. With the remnant of his force, he drew off to Nuremberg, where he sent the dispatches. The bearer was delayed on the road. At Leipzig he met the messenger from Fürth, with news of a defeat at Neuwied. They were beaten by the English under Lord Carfax, with the King of England's Hanoverian and Hessian troops. They lost all their baggage and artillery. The amount of prestige gained by the enemy is considerable. It is the opening of the campaign . . ." Christian reminded his listener, with a certain patience, "and it was most important that the first successes should have been ours. Olivenza has been months crossing the Tyrol, in fine weather and without opposition. It is this kind of generalship that has placed Your Majesty where you stand now. These men must be made an example."

But Leopold protested. He remembered Olivenza with kindness—the lean, courteous, grave Spaniard; with even more kindness he remembered Guastalla, the Italian, a friend of his father; a man who had played with him when he was a child; he was not going to deliver these men over to any manner of punishment and humiliation at the hands of this upstart mercenary.

"Let them be!" he said. "I will go into the matter presently."

"De Lisle is coming up presently," Christian remarked, still with infinite patience. "He will support me."

"No doubt," said Leopold, heavily. "The French always support Your Highness; but after all, I am the Emperor," he added, weakly.

"Humanly speaking," said Christian, with a slight smile, "Your Majesty is only King of the Romans and Elector of Bavaria; and your Electorate, unfortunately, is mostly in the hands of the enemy. It is my business to make you Emperor, and it seems, Sire, that you are going to make

that difficult for me. Listen, Sire," he continued, with eagerness, "have you the whole thing clearly before your eyes? Austria is yours, but part of Bavaria, you know—Hanover, Westphalia and The Spanish Netherlands—are held by the English, the Dutch and the Hanoverians. Pomerania, Poland and Kurland are loyal, but, I think, dubiously so. Brussels is in the hands of the enemy. Our allies, the French, certainly hold the Rhine; and the Palatinate, there they have just been defeated; and these troops on which we were counting, coming from Italy, have been scattered. The enemy are sending reinforcements to the Italian front, and I know not how we are well to spare men to meet them."

"I can hear none of this now," said Leopold, impatiently. His head was aching, his eyes burning. "You must talk of it with Hensdorff; I am no general," he added bitterly.

"But if you would be Emperor," said Christian, still preserving his ironic patience, "you must know something of this matter. I wish De Lisle would come—he is rather late. The King of Prussia did not like that news to-night," added Christian; "he was disappointed, discomposèd; it came in an evil moment, His Majesty is avaricious for success."

"He is as false as a fox!" cried Leopold, furiously. "Even now, I believe he treats with the enemy!"

"I have no doubt that he does," answered Christian. "It little matters whom he treats with. The question is whom he will serve. If I can have his troops, he may pursue his policy with whom he will."

Leopold turned away towards the inner room. He made a gesture that dismissed Christian.

"I have nothing more to say to-night. It seems to me that you have matters pretty well in your own hands; but I would again remind Your Highness that I will not have Guastalla or Olivenza touched."

Christian bowed without replying; and Leopold passed between the long curtains that hung before the door of the bedchamber.

Christian stood thoughtfully a moment, and in that moment Count Hensdorff entered the Royal Apartment.

"His Majesty has retired," remarked Christian. "He can endure no more to-night. Will you pursue him into his bed-chamber? I think, however, there will be little to be gained from him."

Count Hensdorff sighed. He looked haggard and fatigued. This first and considerable cross had greatly moved him; the whole atmosphere seemed heavy with the taint of failure.

"I am badly hampered," added Christian, "even before I take the field. I warned you, Count Hensdorff, and I warned the Emperor; there were too many delays—and now we must face the result."

"Both those men are incapable," replied Hensdorff. "I complained to the late Emperor about them. One is a Spanish grandee, and the other was his friend; and there had to be meddling with them."

"They'll be meddled with now," said Christian, calmly. "I intend to replace them both."

"Has the Emperor agreed to that?" asked Hensdorff, in surprise.

"He has not," said Christian, "but I think that little matters."

He passed thoughtfully to the marble ormolu table by the window, and fingered the glittering collar of the Fleece, with the diamonds hanging like a cluster of stars.

Count Hensdorff smiled sourly.

"You've got that," he remarked, "now you'll want more solid things, eh?"

Christian smiled at him without umbrage.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Hensdorff, biting his heavy forefinger.

"I must wait till De Lisle comes up, then I shall move straight on the enemy and clear them out of Bavaria. Until the country is all ours we cannot move. There are too many wedges of Hanoverians and English into the Imperial Dominion."

"Anhalt-Dessau is much agitated," remarked Hensdorff. "This defeat of Guastalla was too near his kingdom for his liking."

"Anhalt-Dessau will be safe enough," remarked Christian, calmly. He laid down the sparkling collar of The Golden Fleece and turned to Hensdorff with a half smile. "I think there is no more to be done here—" he glanced towards the curtains that concealed Leopold—"he is overwhelmed; leave him alone, if he is to make any show to-morrow." With that he took up his hat and left the room.

As he passed down the long corridors, so lately adorned in the elaborate and elegant French fashion with mirrors and statues and long pictures of woods and meadows and nymphs, he had to pass the apartment assigned to the Archduchess Maria Luisa. He smiled to hear the light rise and fall of the women's eager voices within, and slackened his steps a moment; in that moment the high double door was opened, and the Archduchess came out into the corridor.

She had not changed her travelling dress, and was in some disarray; she was always careless of her attire like her brother; her cravat hung in manly fashion, loosely knotted over the bosom of her green habit, and her curls were loose and disordered under a black ribbon.

She was not as handsome as Leopold; always too pale, her features too heavy, her eyes were marred by drooping lids; but she had both grace and dignity, and a wistful elegance; seeing Christian, she stopped at once and looked at him; and he stopped too, even after his mechanical and courteous salutation. He remembered how she had been offered to him, and how he had refused her, and he was sorry for her; he could recall dropping her miniature from his bed, letting it fall with contempt onto the bedstep. And the miniature had flattered her: she was not so delicately coloured, nor so lively in expression, as the little painting had pretended.

Yet she had charm: a wistful and timid charm. Christian knew that she must be aware of those shameful negotiations in which she had figured; and he smiled and bowed again, with an exaggerated deference. He would not have spoken, but she stopped him as he was about to pass on.

"Why have you not brought your wife, Monseigneur?"

she asked. "All the ladies are gathered in Berlin, and we should have been glad of her company."

"She is, as yet," answered Christian, "unused to the world, and happier, Madame, where I have left her—at Ottenheim."

The Archduchess replied, nervously:

"As for me—I could not stay in Vienna. The times are too full of rumour and alarm. Even to-night, Monseigneur, I hear there has been disastrous news."

"Not disastrous, I hope," replied Christian, smiling, "but not good news, Madame."

He perceived that she wished to detain him, and in his courtesy he suffered himself to be detained. He wished to efface from her mind the ugly episode in which he and she had both innocently figured. He knew that he had, despite himself, as it were, inflicted a gross insult upon this delicate and fastidious woman, and he would have liked to make amends.

She closed the gleaming door behind her, and moved towards him. He noted her slight limp, which had been the subject of so much ribaldry from her brother's enemies.

He had seen her several times before, but never before had he noticed her carefully: she had been to him merely a pale woman who did not attract him. Now she was the woman who might have been his wife—the woman who might have made him an Imperial Archduke—the woman who certainly *would* have been his wife with all these honours as her dowry, had he not seen Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau.

"You need have no apprehension, Your Highness," he said, kindly; "things are not so black as they appear, in these chance rumours and vulgar alarms. Guastalla and Olivenza have been defeated because they were incompetent. The war has been conducted like a hunt, or a party of pleasure. When that is ended, you will see a different turn to affairs."

"We trust in you," said the Princess, stiffly. "My brother is very young, and something overwhelmed."

Christian did not even reflect, much less remind her, that

Leopold was only a very few years younger than himself. Neither did it occur to the lady; for Christian, for all his handsome, even foppish, appearance, had an air of weight and maturity.

"Will Your Highness accompany the army?" he asked, pleasantly.

"No," answered the Archduchess, timidly, "we remain here with the King's sister—there is no other place for us at present."

"I hope, Madame," smiled Christian, "to make Brussels safe for you a little later on."

"Do you hope to take Brussels?" asked the Princess, childishly.

"One may indulge so rashly, I believe," he answered, with a deepening smile.

Now she had to permit him to go; why she had detained him she could not tell; why she was reluctant to leave him she could not tell, either. If he had never before noticed her, she, from the first moment she had seen him, had noticed him. She held her hand out now, and he kissed it; perhaps with some half regret for what he had lost in losing this lady. And yet a very faint regret, for even now he was enjoying, in the secret chambers of his heart, the infantile graces and maiden sweetness of Eleanora, safely locked away from all of them, waiting for him in Ottenheim.

The Archduchess returned to her apartment and sat sighing among her ladies, her hands locked in her lap. She was fatigued and dispirited; she had heard Hensdorff that very day discussing a double marriage, that of herself and her brother—with two people whom she had never seen; and she turned her head towards the door, thinking of how she had opened it and met Prince Christian outside.

Neither Christian nor Leopold slept that night; the first was busy with his secretaries and the second with his priest. And Gabor, also, had little sleep. He walked about the clear, moonlit streets, agitated, stimulated by brilliant thoughts. For a while he sat in a little beer cellar and lis-

tened to the thumping, pounding music, and watched the couples dancing in the heated, rancid atmosphere, dark with tobacco smoke.

Then he went out into the streets again, refreshed by the strong, bleak night breeze on his face, and wandered in and out of little, dark alleys, where obscure print-shops already dared to expose drawings of Leopold and Christian as bear and bear-leader. Gabor enjoyed these crude daubed prints showing the great mercenary leading the Emperor by a chain; or, seated high in a chair of State, insolently bidding his master pull off his boots. In all the drawings, lampoons and pamphlets piled up in these little dark shops in the little dark alleys, Gabor could spell out the public opinion of the Emperor as mocked and abased; and that of Christian as owning a pride as high as heaven; all had a Columbine in the background. And Gabor, knowing the secret of the two men, took a deep and terrible delight in thinking how he would twist their fates as he pleased. He knew what was racking Leopold; he knew what had lain behind his agitation at the banquet—the tremblings of a sheer passion that consumed him; and he knew the slumbering ecstasy in the heart of Christian.

For a long space he wandered from shop to shop, peering into the shadows to make out the half-hid libels and lampoons. Then he returned to his own high-placed chamber, which looked so widely over the dark and quiet city. Again he leant from his gabled window as he had leant earlier in the evening; but this time, instead of looking down into the narrow street, he looked towards the dark pile of the Palace, where those two men now were; he could see lights in most of the windows—few would be taking repose there to-night!

Gabor could imagine the storms of hope and fear distracting Leopold, and the lavish confidence and pride of power upholding Christian—Christian, who was so unconscious of any evil threatening him or his; who was unaware of any misfortune which he himself could not grapple with.

"And I," thought Gabor, "would like to see him so vile, so base, that none can wish him worse."

Presently he returned to his lamp-lit table. There was paper of many kinds, different quills, and ink; Gabor was an expert in counterfeit handwriting, in the unravelling of cipher, and all such tricks.

He now took up a fine sheet, and began to write.

TWENTY-ONE

WITH the dawn, Maréchal De Lisle came up from Belgrade, and was immediately met by Christian and the King of Prussia. Leopold, as befitted both his rank and his mood, remained in his room in the Royal Palace. He had received a manner of feverish consolation from the exhortations of Father St. Nikola; there in religion, in the proud, mighty, inflexible and hereditary religion of his House, he found a certain strength. He could only go on if God had ordained that he should go on; and in the solemn assurances of the Jesuit that his elevation was indeed the Divine Will, Leopold had found a comfort for his confusion and bewilderment. He had not, however, even in his most intimate confessions to the priest, mentioned the heart of his torment: the thought of Eleanora, the girl whom he had paid as the price of the services of Prince Christian; the girl who had been intended for his own wife, and whom he had lost by so little.

He wished to ignore the existence of this hidden passion, and therefore, even to his confessor, he could not breathe that secret and cherished name. Yet, even now, with his generals in consultation around him, with his army getting ready to depart, with the fate of his crown and his people hanging delicately in the balance of a perhaps immediate battle, he could not dwell on anything but that girl hidden in Ottenheim. He wished that he had the strength to command Christian to bring her to Berlin, to keep the other women company; but he knew that he could not bring her name across his lips to her husband. He guessed why Christian kept her shut away; why he never spoke of her; she was the jewel at the bottom of the most precious and most secret casket which he intended should ravish the eyes of the owner alone; to embellish his bosom only, and never to be smirched or affronted by the gaze of strangers.

Leopold could understand this. If Eleanora had been his wife, he would so have treated her; and, torment on torment, on these thoughts came the recollection of the interview with the scoundrel Gabor. Even villains sometimes speak the truth, and Leopold had no arts whereby to distinguish truth from falsehood; he did not yet know if what Gabor had said was lies or not. Suppose it were true, and she was languishing with withered hopes, trusting in him for a deliverance he could not send? Supposing she had indeed been forced to her nuptials believing, till belief was useless, that he would never permit her wanton sacrifice? If he could only see her again! Only that—he would ask no more. If it might be given to him to efface the memory from her sweet mind of that last, most dreadful, parting, when he had fled from her like a whipped coward, mounted and ridden away while she stood on her little balcony with outstretched hands, imploring him to stay . . . ay, he had bereft her of more than a day's pleasure in those enchanting woods; perhaps of her whole life—perhaps even of her soul. If he could go back! And he began desperately turning over the distance from Berlin to Ottenheim. Craziness, of course! He could not leave the army: Christian would see to that. Not as an Emperor, a soldier, or a man could he turn back to Ottenheim until the campaign was over. And even then—what of it? Christian would go to her, not he; and he paled, and drooped his head into his hands and bit his lip, thinking of those few hours of that one night when Christian had been with her at Ottenheim, her lover and her lord! Too well he was aware that Christian had an outward splendour and a glittering, pompous reputation, those cold, implacable ways with his fellow men most likely to impress a woman—a young and inexperienced woman. And little hope had he, once Christian had had her in his possession, that she would remember him, her feeble, fleeing lover, the man who had ridden away as Christian would never have ridden away; the man who had not had the courage to take her as Christian had taken her. . . .

He sat idly in his chamber-robe, drinking chocolate; no

doubt they already expected him at the Council of War, but they must wait. He did not care if he was late at the formal deliberations where he would have no voice. He was even, in his goaded weakness, tempted to flout them all by not appearing at all; and so he lingered, unrobed, dishevelled, with his hair falling untidily on his shoulders and his thoughts in Ottenheim.

Then one of his gentlemen came to ask him if he would grant a private audience to one Gabor—Prince Gabor, a Transylvanian, in the employ of Count Hensdorff. Leopold flushed at the insolence of this demand; how the fellow must despise him, to dare a second time to force into his presence. And then, after the sense of affront, came a sense of curiosity; he would see him: he had wanted to see him ever since he had sent him away before. . . .

The gentleman reminded His Majesty that the barbers waited, and the valets; there was not half an hour before the meeting of the Council of War, which had only been delayed from yesterday for the presence of Maréchal De Lisle. But Leopold declared that he had yet time to spare.

"Let this fellow Gabor come to me," he said. "I have at least this half-hour to myself."

Gabor entered. He made the decorous appearance of a private gentleman. All trace of yesterday's debauchery, all last night's wanderings, had been effaced; there was no trace of either. He was sleek, elegant and servile. In his greyish face there was no sign of any emotion. He had crept up the back stairs of the Palace, effecting an entry easily enough, as in most houses and many palaces he could effect an entry.

Leopold received him with a bravado of haughtiness.

"Well, Sir, what do you mean by this second intrusion?" he asked, masking his weakness with defiance.

And Gabor, bowing low, murmured:

"What does Your Majesty mean by a second time receiving me?"

Leopold bit his full under lip. If this was insolence or an insidious pity he could not perceive; he was baffled by this man's depraved and sinister presence.

"Count Hensdorff employs you, I think?" he asked, frowning, and trying to gain time. And he leant back in his flowered bedgown, and clasped his hands behind his head. He could see from the window where he sat a noble prospect of towers and spires, and the bright day coming up over all.

"My business, Sire," replied Gabor, standing now very straight and respectful, "is one from which I shall get either little credit or profit; and one upon which I am forced to throw myself again upon Your Majesty's mercy."

"I should not be seeing you at all," murmured Leopold; "but Hensdorff, it seems, has taken you into his employ. I do not know what part you play, Prince Gabor—" He paused, doubtful as to what to say, wishing to evade the point and yet impatient to come to it.

"What part I play, Sire, though a useful one to you, is of no matter now," said Gabor, almost with too much ostentation of deference and humility. "But I have been chosen by a lady as her messenger."

Leopold blushed; the uncontrollable blood stormed his face; he put his hand to his hot cheeks, vexed to the heart with himself.

"What lady?" he asked, and rose, pulling at the tumbled cambric at his throat.

"Your Majesty will know the lady; it is Princess Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau, now Prince Christian's wife."

"And it is impossible," murmured Leopold, in a fascinated tone, "that she is sending messages to me."

"Not a message, but a letter," smiled Gabor; and produced a long, slim envelope from his pocket, carefully sealed.

Leopold could see nothing else in the room but this; and Gabor delicately laid it on the table, beside the chocolate pot and the flowered Meissen porcelain.

Leopold, speechless, looking down, saw the familiar arms of Kurland, impressed upon the red seal, the ermine and the purple, with the goat's head for crest, and the anagram "C.R.A.C.K." which stood for "General Crack."

"You see," commented Gabor, softly, "you see, Your

Majesty, that already she uses her husband's arms. There can be no doubt that it is indeed from her."

"I do not know her hand," murmured Leopold, faintly; and Gabor could scarcely conceal his triumph at this admission; he had counted on that—that Leopold did not know her hand. There could, indeed, be few outside her own family who knew the writing of so young and obscure a personage as Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau.

"Why should she send this to you?" asked Leopold amazed.

"Her Highness," said Gabor, "is very simple, Sire; a child, almost, as you may have perceived. She chose, that day in Dürsheim, to make a confidant of me. She wished to convey this letter, which contains"—he shrugged to his ears—"who knows: perhaps some prayer for her husband's advancement or protection."

Leopold caught the sneer and writhed.

"We will not discuss what is in this letter," he said, haughtily, "but how you received it."

"It was sent to me," replied Gabor, quickly, "by one of the Duchess of Schönbuchel's servants. Your Majesty may speak with him if you will."

But Leopold shrunk back.

"Not that," he said; "discussing with servants this affair. It is enough that I must parley with you, Prince Gabor; enough that the Princess has taken such a strange way to communicate with me."

"She is in a strange situation," said Gabor. "A wife and not a wife," he added, carefully; "a wife left so soon, too soon for her safety."

"What do you mean?" asked Leopold swiftly.

"I said *not* a wife," insinuated Gabor. "Prince Christian took her to his Château, and there left her, as he might have left his sister. For half an hour he spoke with her—and then left her."

"For half an hour he spoke with her," repeated Leopold, slowly. "How do you know this? And what do these innuendoes mean?"

"Your Majesty's mind can tell you what I mean. Reflect on my words, Sire, and you will see the very heart of my meaning. Prince Christian keeps the maiden for the end of the campaign. The maiden, Sire, waits for—" and he paused, smiling at Leopold; the word "you" had been formed upon his lips. "She is as she was when she left her father's house. Her dreams of love, Sire, are undisturbed.

"That was a subtle move on Prince Christian's part—his way of love, Sire. And there she stays in Ottenheim, her Paradise serene. Love waits for the lucky man, Sire."

"Is this possible?" breathed Leopold. "And how do you know?"

"It is very possible, Sire, to the fantastic-minded. Prince Christian cared enough to wait, seeing perhaps that she was occupied with thoughts of another man."

"But he," cried Leopold, "could not have known this, even if it were true."

Again Gabor shrugged, spreading out his hands.

"It is not for me to say. I come not into this at all, save as a passing confidant of the distracted maiden. She has confided in me, Sire—" He glanced towards the envelope. "She has trusted in you. I have no further part, save in so far as you should care to command me."

"I command nothing but your secrecy," said Leopold, scarcely knowing what he said. "I know not at the moment what to say or do—leave me; I have no longer any time—"

"Nor any answer for the Princess Eleanora, Sire?" smiled Gabor. "The lady is in deep distress and confusion."

"But these matters that you speak of—that she is still . . ." Leopold paused and altered his sentence, which, in his agitation, he scarce knew how to phrase ". . . that she is only by her name his wife? How is this known to you?"

"It is known, Sire, to every one—in Ottenheim."

Leopold did not answer; he turned and stared out of the window at that clear, brilliant prospect of the lovely city beneath the leaping light of growing day. He could not now afford to affront Gabor. He seemed, in some insidious and horrible way, to have wound into the very heart

and core of his most cherished secret. What the man knew or did not know he dared not enquire. He looked at him with loathing and with fear, and spoke him fairly with a bitter effort.

"Go now," he said, "and before we leave Berlin I will send my answer; if not by you, by another."

"Best by me, Sire," remarked Gabor, calmly, "since this is scarce a business into which to bring too many meddlers. Tongues move quickly, Sire, in such an affair. It were well," he added, boldly, "not to offend Prince Christian before the issue of the campaign is decided."

"Why should I in any way offend Prince Christian?" said Leopold, nervously and wildly.

"Sire, if I may dare to say, I think perhaps if you wrote to the Princess Eleanora or she wrote to you it would most deeply, and even mortally, offend Prince Christian."

Leopold had not thought of this, and the words brought him up sharply as the sudden sight of an abyss might bring a man up who had been stumbling through fog. All his hopes, all his destiny, lay in the hands of Christian—the husband of Eleanora.

"Give me the letter," he muttered, hoarsely, "and presently I will let you know my resolve."

"How then shall I find Your Majesty? It is not so easy for me, once we have left the city, to come into your Imperial presence. Hensdorff can see no reason why I should be closeted with you, Sire; and as for Prince Christian, I am in his deep displeasure."

"I will contrive it," said Leopold, eagerly; "somehow I will contrive it. Leave that to me; and now, begone! Neither," he added, with deep distaste, "neither your service nor your reward shall be forgotten, Prince Gabor."

The Transylvanian bowed, and gracefully stepping backwards, left the Royal presence, congratulating himself on having struck a shrewd blow at that proud edifice of Christian's fortunes; a blow that would bring down the glittering fabric of Christian's ambitions, and those of Leopold; and

those of that foolish, thoughtless, scared girl to one quick ruin.

Leopold immediately tore open the letter. It was brief, written in a fair hand on a fine paper, with a faint perfume of violets, forged only a few hours ago in that top gabled room by Prince Gabor—written carefully and fastidiously there, and sealed with that seal which he had used when in the employ of Christian; an easy trick, a simple ruse—but it had caught an easy and a simple man. Leopold had no doubt whatever that he looked upon the writing of the Princess Eleanora, and he trembled and felt giddy to swooning as he fingered the paper which he believed she had touched, the seal he believed she had pressed. Perhaps this missive had lain in her delicious bosom; perhaps those soft lips of hers had touched it with pain and regret.

She wrote: "Sire, Monseigneur—I am left here, bewildered and alone. They say that I am wed to Christian of Kurland, and some ceremony there was. Yet I am free at heart as when we met in the beechwoods of Dürsheim. Why did you go away? Will you come back some day and tell me what all this means? I am lonely, and often frightened. He whom they call my husband is a stranger to me; they talk of his return. Often he writes; and I cannot answer. Yet because of many dreams, I write this to you. Help me or comfort me! Your broken-hearted ELEANORA."

Leopold was utterly deceived. So she might write—the romantic, lonely girl, shut away in Ottenheim. What had Gabor said? His pulses beat quickly. "The maiden waits." Christian had left her—not for himself, perhaps, but for another; Christian had shown forbearance, odd, chivalrous forbearance the advantage of which he, Leopold, might reap; a languorous and voluptuous glamour was gilding the day for him. He felt a lift of exaltation such as he had not known for years. The girl was there as she had always been. What was that ceremony in the Lutheran church? That civil ceremony? Why, nothing! He with his influence at Rome could have that futile ceremony annulled

easily. He need not think of her as Christian's wife. That pure, sweet and delicate creature, shut up with all the mercenary's plunder and all his gaudy and vulgar wealth in Ottenheim! No, she was still Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau, and that Lutheran marriage was as nothing.

He did not think of his promise to Christian, or of the possible consequences of breaking that promise. He hastily lit the taper on the desk and burnt the letter, even to the seal, and crushed the ashes up into fine powder and stamped them into the carpet. There should be no slander against her through his indiscretion; he had not been of much finesse or judgment as yet in any affair, and he was unversed in any amorous intrigue; but his passionate desire to shield and protect the Princess Eleanora lent him wits.

Last night had been a degrading lesson; he would not so easily betray himself again. Surely from Christian he could learn some composure!

As he submitted himself to the valets and barbers he did not think of the Council of War waiting for him, or of his armies preparing for the march, of his enemies advancing, of his possible coronation. He thought of Eleanora, and of how he could answer her letter.

T W E N T Y - T W O

LEOPOLD was late at the Grand Council of War that had been hastily called in the closet of the King of Prussia.

"He shows little prudence," remarked the host, drily, "and seems like a man who has delivered himself to his destiny."

"Yet the moment is pressing, Sire," said De Lisle, urbane, but judicious, "and hardly one for whimsical delays and idle moods."

Christian had his notebook open in front of him. On it he was idly drawing a plan which seemed like a thin, pointed star, but was really a map of the first town he had ever taken—that of Ath. He traced the bastions, the counter scarps, and the path running from one to another, while he listened to the men all discussing Leopold, and all discussing him with disdain and some anger.

Christian glanced round from one face to another: they were all flushed and excited, agitated by self-interest. The foxy face of the King of Prussia was almost livid. Only De Lisle remained completely serene; he was an elderly man, and with many experiences had gained much dignity. Neither his heart nor his interest was in this war, which, even if successful, could mean neither glory to him nor gain to his country. He was fighting for an abstract thing—the splendour of the King of France; a powerful symbol, no doubt, but not one which could inspire a man like De Lisle to very great enthusiasm.

Christian spoke: he felt no malice against Leopold now; that insult outside Belgrade had long since been avenged; he also had far too keen a sense of discipline to wish to hear the figurehead of all this pomp depreciated; it was no use for him to try to put up a creature whom all his allies and

colleagues were endeavouring to pull down and mock. "No doubt," he thought to himself, "even when I have put him on the Imperial Throne, he will topple off it again; but that will not be my business. Once he is crowned I will wash my hands of him; but for the moment I must make the best of him." And he began to speak for Leopold—without enthusiasm, but lucidly and with justice. He was now President of the Council of War, Grand Master of the Artillery, and Generalissimo of the troops of the Emperor. He therefore was listened to even by the kings and princes present with considerable respect.

He addressed himself, in particular, to the King of Prussia, in whom he had a special interest: for this sovereign was now in nominal possession of Kurland, wrested from Russia, the ancestral heritage of Christian, the promised bribe for his success in the coming campaign.

The Poles were willing enough to accept Christian as Duke of Kurland; he was, after all, the last of the Ketlars; and though the Empress of Russia's favourite still put in a claim, the King of Prussia was yet the predominant power in the final disposal of Kurland, and it had been already understood that he was willing to relinquish this to Christian in exchange for the coveted province of Silesia, which Christian had engaged to use all his influence to procure for him.

It was because of Silesia that his wily Majesty had entered the war; he and Christian therefore understood each other; and Christian now addressed him with a certain friendliness and respect:

"We should not judge His Majesty by last night," he remarked; "he has his virtues: he is affable and amiable, and those qualities go well with the people. There were some hearty huzzas for him. . . . He will be popular, and that is an enormous asset."

"Popular with the people in the streets," muttered the King with a sneer.

"Popular with the soldiers also," smiled Christian.

"And yet he is nothing of a general," remarked De Lisle, negligently.

"He is a brave man," replied Christian, quietly, "and an agreeable one. He is also generous."

"A soft-hearted sentimentalist," snapped the King of Prussia, who had taken an instant dislike to Leopold.

Christian slightly shrugged; he could not see what this had to do with the matter. He guessed that the King of Prussia was bitter because of those two defeats; he was irritated because he suspected that he had made a poor bargain by joining the cause of Leopold. And again Christian endeavoured to excuse the man he had promised to set up above all other men:

"For some years now," he said, "His Majesty has been hunted and harried. His position has been of the most difficult, and it would have required an unsurpassable courage to face it all with equanimity. For myself"—and he raised his voice slightly—"I can see no use in this criticism. If we are to serve the Emperor with any satisfaction to himself and us, we must even make the best of him as he is." Almost in the same breath he added: "But we are under no obligation to make the best of men like Olivenza and Guastalla."

At these names, De Lisle remarked, coldly, that he considered both those generals should be instantly placed under arrest; he suspected ill will on the part of both.

"They must be given," answered Christian, "a chance to justify themselves; but unless they have the best of excuses, well, I suggest to Your Majesty"—and he smiled at the King of Prussia—"that they be asked to visit their estates; they both of them, I believe, have large possessions which have been lately neglected!"

"Will the Emperor consent to this?" asked De Lisle, who knew Leopold's kind nature and his particular tenderness towards these two generals.

"Surely," said the King of Prussia, impatiently, "His Majesty would not interfere in such a case?"

Christian did not reply: he merely smiled, and continued to draw double lines round the star which represented Ath. The talk went on, flagging and yet impetuous. Every one's nerves were ajar, except those of De Lisle and Christian.

They all argued but to little purpose; they discussed plans and discarded them; they drew maps and tore them up. Presently Christian wearied of his designs, and, raising his head, gazed out of the window behind him, turning so away from the others, of whose agitated and in many cases foolish faces he was becoming weary. This Council had to be gone through, but he knew it to be of little purpose. He had already made his plans, and nothing could induce him to alter them—least of all anything that any of these men might say. Presently he would speak to the King of Prussia and De Lisle privately. They were the only two who mattered.

Meanwhile these Princes, Electors and Potentates—the Spanish, Italian, Austrian and French—must have their pompous arguments, their elaborate discourses, their parade and flourish of power and influence.

Christian looked into a cold, bright, blue sky in which was a curdle of white cloud, rising with majestic slowness into the mighty dome of upper air. Against the bottom of this cloud rose the exact and precise spires and towers of Berlin, and a thin flutter of bright-coloured flags.

Christian's thoughts went back to Ottenheim and the Danube—that river which he loved more than he loved any man; which seemed more akin to him than any man: the Danube, like a knight in silver armour, taking his rest between the dark hills, the springing forests, now bare save for the last gold dust of shrivelling leaves. And there stood his Château, gaudy with his trophies, rich with his spoils—there in the gorgeous woods the stately alleys where the exotic animals wandered, and the incredible birds fluttered tufts of glittering plumage; where the tinkling fountains rose and fell into basins that swelled into subtle shapes of monstrous blossoms there *she* sat, guarded by Poles and Uhlans in their fur or tiger skin pelisses and gay brocades, in their barbaric jewels, armed with their monstrous weapons, prancing on their curvetting horses—there she stayed, waiting for him—safe: looking over that azure prospect, as he had so often looked over it; moving through the rooms where he had so often moved; sleeping in the sumptuous

bed where he had so often slept. In his pocket was a letter from the Duchess of Schönbuchel, a flattering letter, drawing for him in pleasing colours the picture of Eleanora—who spoke of him (wrote the cunning old woman) even if she was too timid to write.

Christian was well able to discount the flattery of the worldly Duchess, but he drew a certain satisfaction from it nevertheless; he trusted her, if not to tell the truth to him, at least not to tell it to Eleanora either. He did not think that from her would come any gossip or evil hint; Eleanora did not know about his birth; he was sure that from the Duchess and those whom she controlled, Eleanora would never know. And while the talk grew louder round the table, Christian's thoughts flew ahead: need Eleanora ever know? If he was ever Duke of Kurland again, that damnable break in the line, that ghastly blot on his descent, that hideous injustice and cruelty of his birth—need that ever be known? When he blazoned all his arms over the palaces in his duchy, there would be none who would dare point out the absence of the bend sinister that should have been there. . . .

After this campaign, when he had crowned Leopold and taken his reward, there would be nobody in all the world who would dare to speak of his origin; at least, no one save those so obscure, vile and base that no heed would be taken of them. Among kings and princes and ruling sovereigns, he would take an admired and brilliant place. Eleanora and his children—Eleanora's children—need never know!

So far went his weakness, springing from his great humiliation; sitting there among all these men who treated him as more than an equal, who almost deferred to him as a superior, Christian dared to dream like this—dared to hope that his torment, his essential shame, might be blotted over and forgotten in the dazzle of his achievements, in the safe splendour of his happy marriage; not heeding, nor caring, what was said round the table in those raucous voices, every moment getting louder, more strident, even menacing, Christian remained turned in his chair, staring at the cloud, the

spires and the flags. He exulted in the cloud—at the triumphant majesty of its march across the sparkling blue of the untainted azure. There was a superb conqueror, and there a mighty field of victory! Like a hero marching, with trails of captured banners behind him, marching to inevitable and supreme victory, that majestic cloud came on, dominating the whole heaven.

Christian's visions out-topped the clouds. What plot of ground was there large enough for the palace he would build? His soaring colonnades would pierce the highest heavens with their crested capitals; Mitau, the diamond and the city, he saw it as one, glittering on the lap of the chosen woman. The Empire was too narrow for the sweeping exultation of his gesture; towns, forts, armies too petty to be pieces in the game he played; where in all the globe was there anything superb enough to satisfy him, even by a little?

Christian heard the scrape of chairs, the clatter of swords, as the men rose, many of them heavily and awkwardly.

Leopold had entered the room. He stood, hesitant, inside the door. That was his habit, which many men had remarked with irritation—to remain always for a second reluctant on any threshold.

But Christian, turning and rising also, though with a leisurely movement, saw that Leopold's mood had changed. He was no longer depressed, downcast, or distraught; but was certainly braced and kindled—either by some inward thought or by some outward event. He strode to the top of the table, and took his place with an air which, till now, had been foreign to him. He appeared to master these men, and impose his wish upon them, though he smiled with his usual amiability. He had been carefully valeted and barbered, and Christian approved his sumptuous appearance in his flamboyant field-marshal's uniform; Christian even thought that, if he maintained this amiable and gallant demeanour, he might come to like, and even admire, him.

Leopold brushed some fine, almost invisible, dust from the tips of his fingers—the remaining dust from the letter of

Eleanora which he had burnt at the taper: the supposed letter from Eleanora—the letter which Gabor had composed in the little room in the gables during that last night of fireworks and huzzas.

Under the stiff military curls, heavy with pomade and powder, Leopold's young features were pale, but resolute. He smiled somewhat nervously it is true, yet joyously. Christian wondered, not without a certain indifferent interest, what had happened to the Emperor; and he thought vaguely of the Countess Carola, whose dark thin elegance he had seen in the inner room while he had spoken to the Archduchess Maria Luisa in the corridor.

The King of Prussia also seemed pleased by the Emperor's more manly air; but he broached at once, and without tact, the subject of the two defaulting generals, and put before His Majesty with a certain brusquerie the full account of the two disasters—that of Lech and that of Neuwied.

Leopold listened to the argument and read the reports without understanding. The technical part of the sanguinary engagement did not either impress or enlighten him; he blamed nobody for a defeat or for failure; it was not in his disposition to do so; his brows wrinkled, and he remarked:

"Certainly these are defeats; but I have no doubt that we can repair them." And he smiled coldly towards Christian.

"Repair them first of all, Sire," remarked the King of Prussia, "by making an example of these two generals."

Christian said nothing; he thought the Prussian was being tactless and that it was all a waste of time. He glanced again at that solitary and most noble cloud, making gorgeous progression across the sky. And he thought of the wind humming through those bare trees in his alleys, and the birds flashing through the stripped branches; and Eleanora standing, feeding the deer with little cakes of sugar and raisins. And as so he thought, and the gay images piled so high and sweet in his heart that he laughed suddenly, in sheer joy of heart.

All the men stopped their thick and crossing talk at this sudden and curious interruption.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Leopold, staring at him blankly.

And Christian glanced round the table and smiled at all of them.

"Why do you laugh?" repeated Leopold, insistently.

"Sire, because of a stray cloud," answered Christian; and, taking up his pencil, he again went over the starry points of the plan of Ath.

Leopold, nervously, thought there must be some meaning in these queer words, or at least some meaning behind them; but there was none; Christian meant exactly what he had said. He had laughed at the sheer height of mounting spirit, with joy at the cloud, with joy at his thoughts.

The King of Prussia put in, drily, taking snuff:

"Had we not best get on with the business?"

And Leopold, with an air of authority, said:

"Certainly, gentlemen, we had best get on with the business!"

But his thoughts were far away, as those of Christian had been—and in the same place. He was not thinking of what these men said, nor greatly caring about the issues which hung upon their decisions and his sanction. He was considering that letter which he had just burnt, the ashes of which still clung faintly to his fingers. He was wondering how he could again see Gabor, and what manner of answer he should send to Eleanora.

He was well trained enough in public affairs to listen courteously and with every appearance of attention, to say what was expected of him, to acquiesce gracefully, and to defer with becoming stately respect to his Commander-in-Chief. But Christian, of all in that room, had the least to say. He did not even press the matter of Guastalla and Olivenza; and Leopold also allowed that hateful subject to drop, although the King of Prussia brusquely brought it up more than once.

There was a great deal of noise in the room. The tall, gleaming windows were closed, and on the marble hearth, beneath the new burnished scrolls of an ornate mantelpiece and a mirror surrounded by sprawling gilt figures, glittered and sparkled a clear coal fire. The room had been newly decorated; all the figures that smiled from ceiling and walls were vivid and brilliant. The taste was cold and mannered, but bespoke prosperity and the resolution to achieve magnificence. On either side of the high doorway were pilasters formed of nymphs, whose hair branched into huge flowers for the volutes. Christian thought he saw in them twin Eleanoras. She also had seemed to him to blossom in and out of flowers, as if she grew from flowers, and in flowers disappeared; flowers round her feet and flowers in her hair, herself a flower among them all!

The Council broke up. They had, after all, done nothing but talk a great deal, and finally approved the plan which Christian had worked out that night with his secretaries and set before them. He had not debated or argued, nor asked their sufferance, nor even showed boredom while they wasted time which must come to but this one conclusion—approval of his design.

The cloud had marched away; the hollow dome of blue above Berlin was empty.

Oh, lovely day! Was she walking now behind his colonnades, looking down upon his bubbling fountains, caressing his greyhounds that were like silver feathers? Was she roaming over that vivid emerald grass, that remained so bright after a wet summer? Was she breathing, as he, with deep delight this last gold of fading autumn? A lovely day! And in the loveliness of the day he seemed to meet her, whose beauty was part of everything.

As he rose, Leopold spoke to him. He said, curiously: "You have, Monseigneur, the air of a happy man!"

They had risen, and stood by the window; looking down, they could both see the courtyard, where a double line of soldiery waited for the coming-out of the Emperor. In the

public square beyond were more soldiers. The whole town was lively with martial music, and the ringing sound of trampling feet; with drum and clarion.

The cavalry went to and fro in the darkish, narrow side streets; a clatter and their trumpets came faintly as Christian lightly opened the window on the cool, brisk freshness of the morning.

The whole scene had an air of pomp, of excess, of grandeur, and, to Leopold at least, of emptiness. Neither the fluttering flags nor the mounting spires, nor all this military parade, gave him any confidence in himself; he must revert his thoughts back to Ottenheim to regain any poise or peace of mind.

"I shall be happier," replied Christian, with his indifferent, courteous air, "when Your Majesty is crowned at Frankfurt."

Leopold stared down at the alien town and the massed movements of the soldiery as if he looked at a picture in another man's life. Christian had no clue whatever to his thoughts.

"We start the campaign under a handicap," he remarked, "but I do not doubt that we shall be successful. It is my intention, Sire, to fight through the winter. The war has paltered on long enough. It is my intention to bring it to an end before the spring."

He was thinking of the spring at Ottenheim, and all the marvel and lavishness of flowers by the Danube. And Leopold was thinking of this too. Their glances met. Leopold's blue eyes fell guiltily, while Christian remained serene. He had no cause to drop his eyes; he was single-minded and single-hearted; prepared to meet a world of foes at arms.

TWENTY-THREE

THE Duchess of Schönbuchel moped in Ottenheim. Usually, at this time of the year, she was in Vienna, where she found a great deal of enjoyment and amusement. She could not recall having once, during her long life, spent the winter in the country; and she regarded the coming prospect with some foreboding. If she must stay away from the capital, she would rather have stayed at her own Château of Dürsheim than among these alien magnificences where life ran so stagnantly. She was a connoisseur in news and gossip, and neither news nor gossip came very frequently to Ottenheim. Now the war had recommenced, the posts were interrupted, the roads often blocked; delays were tedious and considerable; yet the Duchess had no thought of abandoning her post. Apart from her promise to Christian, which she regarded quite seriously, her affection for Eleonora held her there, as guardian and companion of a girl so dangerously ignorant and so dangerously highly placed.

The Duchess got what consolation she could out of Colonel Pons, but he, also, was dreary, and mostly in an ill humour; he found his post one of those vexatious and galling honours which irritate more than they glorify. Now that the war had again begun, he wished to be in the thick of the coming engagements; and he had written to Christian asking him to relieve him of the onerous yet dull post at Ottenheim. There was, he said, no need for his presence in the Château, where everything went with monotonous smoothness. There was the majordomo and the steward; there were the officers of the garrison—all well tried and faithful people. He could not see the necessity for his constant presence there.

Christian had written back immediately: "There may be a great many devoted and faithful people in my service, my

dear Pons ; but no one to equal you in judgment, energy and sagacity. You will, therefore, remain at Ottenheim."

Pons had received this mandate gloomily. It was his first taste of secluded leisure, and he did not at all relish it. By the time he and the Duchess had exchanged all their old stories, and their cynic opinion of their contemporaries, there was nothing much left to do but fret through the days, and worry because no news came.

Christian wrote regularly enough ; but he had little to say of public events. If he did not write himself his secretaries sent minute instructions as to the regulation of the estate. But Pons and the Duchess wanted to know about the war, all the excitement and scandal of the camp.

The tale of Guastalla's and Olivenza's defeat dribbled through, and the Duchess was deeply vexed by the last of these disasters. The gaunt Spaniard had been a friend of her childhood. She wrote him a letter of sympathy, of kindness. At the same time, she shuddered a little for her complete safety, and for the snugly tucked-away estate of hers which might yet be drawn into the theatre of war.

Colonel Pons assured her, with melancholy dryness, that they were perfectly safe at Ottenheim. Whatever the issue of the coming campaign, they would not be touched there on the banks of the Danube ; the issue would lie in Flanders.

The Duchess was not so sure ; she thought of the Turks and Hungarians behind, of possible advances and assaults on Vienna ; the long inaction of the days added strength to these vain terrors.

But Eleanora was happy at Ottenheim. Her lessons had ceased, the masters were gone, the girl was suddenly independent, deferred to, respected and admired ; the very atmosphere was full of adulation. The surroundings were to her like the surroundings of enchantment in some of the fairy tales which she so enjoyed reading. After the commonplace home which she had been used to, both in Anhalt-Dessau and at Dürsheim, this had a touch of delicious unreality. She liked the colonnaded terraces, the high rooms hung with silk and brocades and gilded leather. She liked

the plummy fountains, so strong that they bore gilded balls on their transparent crests, dancing them up and down in an endless, crystal arch. She liked the *allées*, so long and straight, where the distance lay, like a glimpse of blue sea, at the far end; she liked the windings of the river, which seemed here so much more noble and sumptuous than it had seemed from the narrow windows of Dürsheim. She was pleased and excited, too, by the garrison—the Polanders, with their shaved heads and fierce moustaches, and fur pelisses and corded casques; and the negroes, from Cayenne and New Guinea, with their women, who wore crowns of bright feathers and stiff necklaces of translucent beads; scarlet, black and orange with painted shells.

The Duchess had looked with rigid disfavour upon these heathens, but was mollified on discovering that they all gathered in the chapel on Sunday, listening decorously to the Lutheran service now held under the aspiring tracery raised for Papist worship.

It delighted Eleanora to see these brilliant soldiers going to and fro, to see them exercising in the great Court of Honour, to hear their trumpets early in the morning and late at night; she was shyly pleased at their deferential salutes, their air of standing aside and looking away when she passed, as if she were a goddess, blonde and frail amidst their strength and darkness.

She found Colonel Pons far kinder than her father had ever been, and, for the first time in her life, she was able to give orders to servants—see people hurry to do her bidding, eager to anticipate her wishes.

She might read what books she liked; she might walk abroad when she liked; there was a little chariot that took her down the shining road to the river; there was a white horse she could ride in the park; Eleanora did not find the days long.

Christian did not write to her, but the Duchess always showed her his letters, wherein he wrote of gifts he had bought for her—a Michelin flounce in Berlin; a pair of Sèvres vases; a great fan of ashy-grey herons' plumes,

mounted in silver: these things he had bought for her, and they were coming when the roads were clear. There were dresses, and jewellery too, to arrive from Vienna and Paris. Christian knew where to buy such clothes as would best befit Eleanora. He was well acquainted with the most elegant of the shops in the Palais Royal; he sent the Duchess lists of the parcels she might expect. Eleanora blushed and smiled to read them. Her feeling was exactly the feeling of a child promised new toys—gorgeous and unexpected toys.

In those last days, like amber and honey, of autumn, that Christian had watched from Berlin, Princess Eleanora felt her heart light enough as she walked through the long, cool corridors at Ottenheim, or wandered in the park, where, on the bare trees, the sun was so strong that the light of its rays seemed like a last golden foliage on the crisp boughs.

Every part of the Château had been prepared for her; nothing was left that showed that any other woman had ever moved through the elegant rooms, or reposed on the satin couches. The light, frivolous French books, lilies and tulips stamped in gilt on their slim, glossy backs, had all been removed, and Eleanora, flitting round the library, found only heavy tomes on mathematics and tactics, Vauban, Catinat, Koehorn, which she did not even open. All the worldly and seductive pictures had gone also; there but remained noble landscapes, with dreamy azure perspectives stretching away, fading behind graceful slim temples, with towering trees and enclosing wreaths of elegant blossoms. And portraits: portraits of Christian and of his father, and of his friends—those men under whom he had served and those who had served under him; Christian as a boy, in a satin skirt and lace cap, holding a parrot; Christian as a young man, in a lawn shirt and a cobalt sash, and a Roman robe arranged like a toga; Christian, in full damascened armour, with a battle scene behind him, and with a black and white dog jumping up; Christian standing in an arcade with his chief huntsman, holding an inlaid silver fowling piece; Christian in an embroidered bedgown

drinking chocolate with a nephrite vase in the background. Eleanora looked at all these pictures with some curiosity. There was a picture of Christian's father, too—the handsome, rapacious Duke of Kurland; and the girl ingenuously remarked on the absence of any picture of Christian's mother; where was the late Duchess' presentment?

"She died young," replied the Duchess, evasively; and in her heart she hoped that Christian's mother *was* dead. She had not heard for many years of this lady, who, for all she knew, might be still ranting on the boards of some Venetian or Milanese theatre, singing behind a mask of carnival, in festooned hoops and tinsel garlands. She fervently prayed that this was not so, and that a grave or a convent had swallowed the adventuress in that swift obscurity that too often follows swift brilliance.

But Eleanora did not let the subject go; she asked about Christian's family—if he had had brothers or sisters—and when the Duchess said "No" to this, again about his mother. "She was an Italian princess," said the Duchess, lying deeply; and Eleanora was surprised that no more was added to this statement, for well she knew how the old lady delighted in pedigrees and coats of arms, and how she usually had at her fingertips the genealogy of everybody mentioned, and their intricate relationships with other princes and potentates, and with herself.

One worldly picture had been left, overlooked in the corridor that led to the theatre—a disused place now. But Eleanora chanced one day to wander there; and clear in the golden sunshine that streamed through the tall window was this great gaudy canvas, *The Magdalene Returning to the Pleasures of the World*, by a Venetian painter.

Eleanora had never seen anything like this before, and she stood fascinated, looking at the rich, idle, languorous and voluptuous scene; the beautiful, half-clothed women beneath the thick flowering trees. Their wine was served in gold and silver, and fruit on crystal and painted porcelain; in the gorgeous sky, which looked hot and metallic, were twisted amorous divinities, amid coils of coral-col-

oured, curling clouds; and through thickets of forced, fleshy flowers, curved and shaped like cups filled with overflowing nectar, moved peacocks and leopards wearing gemmed collars and high mounting diadems.

Under a scarlet pavilion surrounded by cavaliers, who seemed grave with delight and fatigued by pleasure, sat the Magdalene, covered only by the finest of lawn veils, but crowned again and again with the braids of her own pale hair, with knots and loops of pearls, with silver horns like those of the crescent moon, from which depended glittering diamonds; so she lay in a noontide trance while the men surveyed her with quelled but unquenchable passion.

There was a lake in the foreground, filled by the shadows of mountains and the glitter of distant castles; and from this lake pages dipped up clear water, which ran back from the wide lips of their ewers, in among the transparent leaves of the curling water-flags.

Eleanora looked long at this enticing picture, but she did not speak of it; she felt that childish sense of having looked at a thing forbidden, and she believed that if the Duchess knew of it, she would have it taken away or covered up.

All the flowers had withered from the garden and the park; the parterres were devoid of bloom. Only along the banks of the Danube was the blue speedwell, very late this year, and vivid as the skies of the dead summer. The exotic birds that Christian had thought of with so much pleasure had died with the first breath of frost. The keepers tried to catch them in gilded cages, and hang them up inside the Château; but they preferred death to this confinement, and one by one, like perished jewels, fell from the rigid branches of the trees, their crests folded back, their plumage drooping, and yet another gem added to their gay array in a bright drop of blood which stained their gaping, delicate beaks.

Eleanora received their dead, rich beauty with tears of pity; their veiled eyes, their stiff claws gave her a pang of remorse. She said that it was wicked to bring them from Brazil and Mexico to perish thus with the first frost of

winter; and she stood for hours underneath the bare trees with sweet cakes and corn in her hands, endeavouring to coax into safety the other truants, who would not even look at her, but remained flashing through the stripped trees until they, too, dropped perished at her feet, with a last flash of colour, a last reluctant resignation to the sadness of death.

The orange deer and the Indian gazelles also pined and died with the cold, although many of them were taken into the stables, and warmed and fed on hot milk. Their enormous eyes looked mournfully at Eleanora, with all the pathos of exiles; without complaint they died.

The park began to be bare; there were few birds and few animals, and no trees or flowers. Even those queer and monstrous beasts safely established in the zoological park, where they had elegant stables and a castle, a lake and every comfort, began to look forlorn and melancholy.

"Such odd beasts are a senseless extravagance," remarked the Duchess, who was thankful that she had never wasted her money on such an idle and unsatisfactory luxury.

But Eleanora was troubled. This was the sole flaw in her pleasure, this perishing of the birds and beasts with the first insidious touch of northern frost.

The Duchess felt it her duty to enlighten her ward and charge in worldly affairs. She tried to talk about the war, although she was not very interested in this herself, and she felt it to be so intricate and confused that she could scarcely explain it; there had always been a war, as long as she could remember, and all the men of her family, and acquaintance, had always been engaged in war.

It was a thing you took for granted, yet found rather difficult to expound; she was so used to great cities changing hands, frontiers shifting their places, armies advancing here and there, to the Empire being split and ravaged, by Christian and Turk alike; she tried to talk of these affairs to Eleanora, who had listened willingly enough at first, but presently yawned, and said that these times were dull. It was not like the old days, when there were knights! These wars were tedious and wearisome, she declared. The long

campaigns, the long sieges, the long waits in winter quarters, the endless movements of heavy bodies of troops . . . the Duchess began to yawn too, as she thought of all that tedium.

"Well, it's men's business, and we must leave it to the men," she concluded. "But we hope that the Emperor will come out successful in this campaign, and then there will be peace for a little while. It would be very agreeable if the campaign could end before the winter," she added; "then we might have a pleasant time in Vienna."

Eleanora also very much wished to go to Vienna. She had never seen any town bigger than Dessau. This was the excuse she gave herself, the longing to see the capital; but she wished to see Leopold again, wished to see him crowned and robed—Cæsar indeed!

"Shall I go to the coronation of the Emperor?" she asked, courageously.

And the Duchess said: "Yes, indeed, of course you will go, as Princess Christian of Kurland, with a coronet on your head, and an ermine gown, with a purple velvet train."

"And then shall we go to Kurland?" asked Eleanora, wonderingly. The whole of her future life seemed utterly strange and alien. Kurland was to her only a name on the map, far away, and cold, surely.

"I suppose so," replied the Duchess, evasive as always, when Kurland, or Christian, or his family were spoken of. "That will depend on what is arranged between the Emperor and the King of Prussia—and your husband. I don't know, Eleanora, how they will parcel out their rewards and estates."

"But we shall not always stay here?" asked Eleanora.

"Oh, no!" cried the Duchess. "This is a mere country villa. You will certainly not stay here. If you do not go to Kurland you will go to Vienna. There will be many diversions—the opera, and the ballet, and the theatre. And concerts at the Hofburg; and there you will meet the Archduchess Maria Luisa, who is a charming princess; and many other ladies of your own rank. And I suppose," she

added, carefully, and with an exact deliberation, "that by the time the campaign is over, a wife will have been found for the Emperor. He cannot have a Court without an Empress, you know!" And she smiled rather foolishly at Eleanora, because she felt foolish in face of the girl's single-minded sincerity. She knew that romance of Captain Leopold at Dürsheim, and the walk under the beech trees; she knew, too, that the episode, light as featherdown as it was, might linger long in the mind of a child like Eleanora. She saw by the cloud that passed over the girl's candid face that it *had* lingered.

"Who will be the Empress?" asked Eleanora.

"I don't know," said the Duchess. "Some German princess, I suppose."

"German princess?" repeated Eleanora.

And for the first time it faintly occurred to her that possibly, just possibly, Leopold might have come to Dürsheim to ask for her hand.

She did not dare demand of the Duchess if this was true; but the thought had come into her mind, and would not be easily banished. *She* was a German princess; she had often heard her father say that her rank and her pretensions were high. If the Emperor had wished to marry a German princess, he might even have wished to marry her.

"You had better write to your husband," said the Duchess, hastily. "I think that it is time you did; he has been away some weeks now, and I am weary of these long letters which I must send to him. It is time, my dear, that *you* took up the pen and wrote something."

"But I have nothing to write," said Eleanora, simply. "I do not even know how to address him."

This was true. She was quite incapable of composing the letter that Gabor had forged in his high room in Berlin, as Leopold might have guessed, if he had known more of her; if, indeed, he had known more of any woman. Had he not been as simple-minded as she was herself, never could he have believed that that letter had been composed by the Princess Eleanora.

"Well," said the Duchess, impatiently, rather overwhelmed by so much ingenuous simplicity, "well, you may write and thank him for the presents which he says he has bought for you."

"But they are not here yet," said Eleanora.

"Never mind; you can say that you are grateful to him for buying them. You can wish him success in the campaign. And surely, my dear child, you can compose a few lines?" She finished rather at a loss, and she thought to herself: "Really, the child has been brought up very badly, in a most peculiar fashion. She knows nothing, and it seems impossible to teach her!"

"You must realize," she said, feebly, "that you are married, Eleanora."

"But it doesn't seem to make any difference, being married!" replied the girl.

"It will make a good deal of difference later on," said the Duchess, shortly. "It's time you got used to it."

And she knew she spoke foolishly indeed, for there had been little change in the girl's life made by her marriage with Christian, for all this strange and outward show. She was still the dreaming Eleanora, the schoolgirl of Dürsheim. Nothing had occurred to wake her from her dreams, or change their direction. And all day and all night, these dreams were filled by the figure of Leopold. Vague was this shadowy figure; far off and indefinite, but always there. And of Christian she thought not at all, save with a certain trembling terror and a hope that it would be long before he returned.

The Duchess tried to speak of him; to say that he was a great man, and would be a greater man yet. Eleanora listened dutifully, but these praises did not touch her; she had felt very childish and foolish in Christian's presence; he had seemed to her to ignore her, as a mere trifle. Never had she felt so small in her own estimation as when Christian had looked at and spoken to her; even on the morning when he had given her the diamonds he had seemed alarming.

With Leopold it had been different; he had been warm

and kind, softness in his looks and in his voice; he had felt the rapture of the woods; he would have been a gallant playfellow, a charming knight . . . and he was the Emperor.

The Duchess guessed her mood and could do little to change it; she was old and weary; she had not the courage to explore the recesses of that candid mind, the secrets of that innocent heart, that facile shallow nature.

"I've no doubt," she reflected rather sourly to herself, "that Christian is quite capable of doing his own wooing when he returns. And as for Leopold, of course he will forget, to say nothing of the Countess Carola, who, I have no doubt, will now have got hold of him again—bold-faced minx that she is, with her intriguing old husband and her air of virtue!"

Eleanora did not write to Christian, though she sent dutiful billets to her father, in which she mentioned how the foreign birds were dying and the exotic animals languishing; how the speedwell was blue on the bank of the Danube, and how she was well and happy in the rather chill splendours of Ottenheim, longing for the war to be over, yearning for the spring.

Sometimes she would go riding with Colonel Pons to the far confines of the noble estate and look curiously at the peasants, going to and fro and taking in the harvest: a poor harvest this year, with few to gather it in.

"War seems a wicked and a wasteful thing," she sighed, "and I do not understand why it need be. Why, the Duchess says there's always been a war—as long as she can remember!"

The old soldier smiled indulgently; he was anxious about the next news from Christian. He knew well enough that this was going to be a difficult matter, even for a soldier like Christian, to tackle; the Allies were strong, and flushed with success; the Imperial troops were scattered, and disheartened by those first two reverses; and Leopold was no man to know how to handle such a crisis.

Christian had been so far invincible. But even invincible

heroes were sometimes brought down by the misfortune of complicated circumstances. As they returned through the park, where the blue speedwell still lingered in the fading grass, they heard the clear trumpets of the negro hussars.

"I feel as if I were a prisoner!" smiled Eleanora, lightly, "and those were my guards."

Colonel Pons said:

"I am to get whatever you wish for."

Eleanora wondered if there was not something for which she could ask. The other day, when she had been at Dürsheim, the day before, when she had been at Anhalt-Dessau, there had been so much she wanted! But now there was nothing: every childish wish and delicate desire had been gratified.

"I think I should like to go away," she mused, still smiling. "I'm getting tired of the Danube, though it is very agreeable here."

"That is impossible," said Pons. "I, too, Madame, should like to go away; but it is Prince Christian's orders that we remain until the campaign is over."

"And must we obey his orders?" she asked, simply.

"We must, Madame, I am his soldier, and you are his wife."

Eleanora's plump little hands caressed the two green diamonds that hung on the masculine cravat of her riding-habit. She always wore these delicious jewels, for they were the most beautiful things she had ever seen—so different from the hard, heavy, flashing gems with which her father and the Duchess had adorned her; the old-fashioned ornaments of the rigid court days of long ago.

The bulging blue eyes of Colonel Pons regarded her sideways. He had grown fond of the girl, and wished her well: he hoped that she would be happy with Prince Christian. In quite a simple, paternal way he felt interested in her future, which to most men would have looked so strange and dubious.

"You should write to Prince Christian," he suggested.

"He sends so frequently; but never to me!" smiled

Eleanora. "And, as I have already told the Duchess, I should not know what to say."

"Still, write!" grinned Pons. "I can assure you it would be appreciated."

So Eleanora went to her gorgeous room that mellow autumn afternoon, and sat still in her riding habit, biting her quill pen and frowning out at the melting azure silver of the prospect. Finally, she achieved a few lines.

"Monseigneur: I am very well here, and all is prosperous, save some of your foreign birds have died: for which I am sorry. I shall be glad when the war is over and the Emperor is crowned." (It gave her pleasure to write that; she lingered over that line. The Emperor! Captain Leopold!) "I think the winter is late in coming; they are taking in the harvest. I hope you are in good health, and have agreeable news. I remain, Monseigneur, with all respect and duty, ELEANORA"—"of Anhalt-Dessau" she was going to write; but she changed it, though with an odd sense of queerness, into "OF KURLAND."

The Duchess thought this letter very silly, but reflected there was no telling what would please a man in love. The veriest trifle might give him delight. So she enclosed it with her own flowing, polished and courtly epistle and sent it by the next messenger to Christian.

The days drifted slow, gold and silver, as the river drifted past the rocks, the woods, the Château. The orange and citron trees that stood in front of the long balustrades of the palace were taken in, and put into the orangery for the winter. Great fires were built up on all the wide, generous hearths, and cast warm-coloured lights over the marble mantelpiece.

The Duchess shivered at the approach of winter though she had to admit that she was comfortably housed and well prepared to bear the most rigorous assaults of the season. Colonel Pons fretted at his inaction, and rigorously reviewed the gaudy little garrison. In the evenings he played chess or faro with the Duchess, while Eleanora read from her large calf books, or sewed with her tiny needle and fine

thread. She always went to bed early, and then Pons and the Duchess would gossip over Arabian glasses of rich wine, flavoured with nutmeg and cinnamon. Pons was always cautious what he said about Christian, but still the Duchess tried to draw from him many anecdotes of his master's past life, most of which afforded her a good deal of chuckling amusement, and many of which increased her already vivid admiration for that mighty soldier.

Every one in Ottenheim was in perpetual readiness for news of the campaign; the corn sheaves were cleared from the dark flank of the hill, above the big, silver whiteness of the river, and, through the boughs of the distant forest, yet more distant hills could now be clearly seen. The Duchess and Pons wearied of the incessant beauty of the prospect from the wide, high windows; but Eleanora, waiting for she knew not what in Ottenheim, was still happy, with a vague, colourless happiness, and asked no more than the smooth running of the day, and the deep dreaming of the night. Sometimes she played her spinet, trying to keep time to the rhythm of the tossing spray of the fountain beneath her window; and sometimes she sang, either fragments of courtly music, or echoes of those rustic songs the gleaners chanted above their labours when the day was ended.

TWENTY-FOUR

CHRISTIAN advanced rapidly with his entire forces; he left Prince Anhalt-Dessau to fortify and guard his own tiny domain, and spread his troops out fanshape, some to hold back the English from the frontiers of Anhalt, some to front and force back the victorious Carfax in Nassau and the Palatinate on to the borders of Lorraine, where the French waited to fall upon them.

With his main body, he pushed across Westphalia, with Brussels as his ultimate objective. Knittelfeldt and Fürth were in command of these two armies which he thus set to the right and left, while he remained in chief command of the main army advancing on the Spanish Netherlands.

Olivenza, with the remnants of his army, had struggled up as far as Cassel, and there remained, giving an indifferent ear to the messages which reached him from the Generalissimo. He produced neither denials nor excuses with which to screen his failure, but comported himself with the greatest insolence, scarcely disguising the fact that, out of resentment at the promotion of Christian to be Generalissimo of the Imperial Forces, he had encouraged the slackness which had led to his defeat, had purposely engineered the long delay which had brought about his disaster.

Receiving the peremptory commands of Christian while he sat idling with an actress from Vienna, who had come to share and to soothe his defeated leisure, Olivenza had expressed himself bitterly about the Kurlander. Touching the sleek spaniel at his feet, he had used an ugly word for Christian; an uglier word for his mother, saying: "My dog is better born than he."

No one, of course, had dared to repeat such outrageous insults to Christian, but the flavour and sense of

what Olivenza had said was conveyed to him. It did not alter his action, for that had been already planned. Two days afterwards, Olivenza was arrested, and the Maréchal de Châterault put in charge of his dispirited and decimated troops, which were taken rapidly down to join Knittelfeldt on the Rhine.

Guastalla had comported himself with the same arrogance; he scarcely troubled to clear himself of a charge of accepting money from the enemy; his attitude was one of disdain. He scarcely professed any loyalty to Leopold. He would not, he said, fight under a mercenary like Christian—a man of no birth, and young enough to be his son. He fell back in straggling, broken lines before the advance of the enemy, leaving what remained to him of baggage and artillery behind him piece by piece, until he joined the main line of the Imperial Armies marching towards the lines of the Allies which defended Brussels and the frontiers of the Spanish Netherlands. Here he also was arrested, and sent under heavy escort with Olivenza to Vienna. The rage and dismay of these two generals was extreme; Guastalla, asking for pen and paper, wrote one line to the Emperor: "Sire, I was your father's friend." Olivenza sent a long, complaining despatch to the King of Spain, his master, bitterly exonerating himself, and bitterly blaming that upstart Christian, who by some vile means had contrived to obtain command of the Imperial Forces.

They were allowed to send these letters, but no notice was taken of their protests or lamentations; they lodged in strict confinement in Vienna.

All this was done with the warm approbation of Maréchal De Lisle, and of the other members of the Council of War—Fürth, Châterault, Arroya, and Knittelfeldt: all men who believed in, if they did not greatly like, Christian, and who were not displeased to have an opportunity of ridding themselves of rivals in the persons of Guastalla and Olivenza, both men who were not greatly beloved, and who had always wantonly and openly worked for their own interests.

Leopold, however, was kept in ignorance of the whole

affair. Hensdorff, who accompanied the army, knew that he would not approve of this unavoidable episode and had asked Christian not to broach it to the Emperor. Christian had done what he had intended to do, and ridded himself of the two defaulting generals; he was quite willing not to annoy Leopold with this news, which could not, however, long be kept from the Emperor. Both the disgraced generals had their relations in the army, and the murmurs of these somehow came to the ears of Leopold by the time their forced marches had brought them to the banks of the Rhine.

The Imperial Army stretched from Limburg; the Emperor had his temporary headquarters at Sieburg. They were now facing the enemy, a detachment of whom still remained at Neuwied, where Guastalla had been defeated. These rapid movements seemed to have disconcerted the Allies, who had made no effort to stop the progress of the Imperialists, even, in some parts, having fallen back within their own lines; they seemed to be forsaking the defences in every direction and concentrating on the potent forts that protected their conquests in the Spanish Netherlands.

Leopold, in incredulous anger at the disgrace of his two generals, sent for Hensdorff, and hotly demanded the truth; Hensdorff was weary of hearing that word "truth." It seemed to him the most disagreeable one in any language. He knew that Leopold was going to be difficult, and he felt that he could not endure any one being difficult at this most important juncture of the campaign.

"Let us, Sire," he entreated, "leave this discussion until later; we have neither patience, time nor energy to waste in futilities now."

"This is no futility," replied Leopold, in a wrangling tone. "I hear that, behind my back, these two gentlemen have been disgraced and sent under arrest to Vienna."

"It is perfectly true," admitted Hensdorff, with an air of resignation, "and I must beg to remind Your Majesty that the full command of your forces has been given to Prince Christian."

"It is impossible, though," replied Leopold, "that he has the power to act thus."

"It is very possible," said Hensdorff, wearily. "He has indeed the power of life and death over all Your Majesty's troops. You must recall the terms under which he took up this position. They were the best terms I could make, Sire, and we at the time were thankful to get them."

At this most unfortunate moment, Guastalla's laconic letter was brought to Leopold. As he read the one line—"Sire, I was your father's friend"—Leopold blushed till the blood throbbed in his lowering face. Never, even on the day of the banquet in Berlin, had he felt so degraded. These men had trusted in him, and he had been considered by Christian of so little importance that he had not even known of their calamities.

"Why was I not told this?" he demanded, aghast, crushing together the letter passionately. "Count Guastalla has had to remind me that he was my father's friend."

"I fear," said Count Hensdorff, drily, "that he has not proved himself a friend to Your present Majesty; and as to why you were not told, no doubt His Highness did not wish to disturb Your Majesty's peace of mind. The duty had to be discharged, and it was best discharged quietly and secretly."

But Leopold would listen to no excuses. He immediately ordered one of his aides-de-camp to bring Christian into his presence. He had been fearfully and bitterly wounded; the more so as this was the first open discord between himself and his Generalissimo. He had left everything to Christian; he had even flattered Christian, and turned to him, and leant on him, glad that there was a man there to face his responsibilities; grateful to Christian for not exposing him for what he was—a leader without decision or energy.

Leopold was, above everything, indolent. He was almost incapable of making the solid exertions required of him, and he was thankful that Christian had taken these exer-

tions upon his own capable shoulders, and left him the splendour only of empty figurehead.

Often he had thought to himself: "Is it possible that I am fawning on this man, after all that has happened, and all that I intend shall happen? Is it possible that I fawn on him?"

But he had flattered and complimented Christian; he had tried to win him with those facile courtesies which came so easily to him—which were part, not only of his nature, but of his training. He had praised his Generalissimo before the Frenchmen, before the Austrians and Spaniards; he had given him, on every possible occasion, full honour and precedence. This had cost him nothing; such actions came easily to the Bavarian. And though he had, in his heart, secretly despised himself for such complaisance, he had continued to use graceful blandishments on the man on whom all his destiny depended, though sometimes he had wondered to himself: "How can I do this, when my thoughts are full of Eleanora, hidden away in Ottenheim?" Still he had done it, because it had been the easiest and the pleasantest method.

Christian had undertaken all the duties of the campaign, and spared Leopold every possible task and fatigue. Leopold, with every day, disliked warfare more and more. He could not endure the parades, the marches, the reviews, the encampments, the raiding of the camps, the entries and the leavings of towns, the meeting of deputations, the sittings of councils of war, the consultations, the studyings of maps, the reading of spies' reports, and the long letters of agents. He had gone through all this business mechanically, with no zest and little interest, and often in complete ignorance of what he saw or signed; always Christian had been there, to support and guide him. In every instance he had leant upon Christian, upon his lucid intelligence and his rapid judgment, upon his calm decisions, upon his impenetrable air of authority. For himself, he had this many day past been weary of the mere sight of the army, nauseated by

the sound of the tramp of feet, and of the hoofs of horses, intolerant of the sound of trumpets and drums, and of the sight of banners and colours. When riding all day between harvests, down the long roads lined by apple trees, in the warm dark of woods, and under their bare boughs, the monotonous lessons of his childhood had occurred to him with maddening persistency.

Six men a file, four files a squadron; two squadrons a wing; three wings a battalion; pikes in the middle, musketeers at the side, in between the drums and trumpets; pikes seventeen feet long, with carps' tongues' heads, men armed with gauntlets of steel, back and front steel again, steel laced into their helmets; companies of one hundred and fifty men; regiments of ten companies, fifteen hundred men; staff officers riding in compact glitter, the baggage wagons, the artillery, the *vivandières*, the tents, the chariots, the reserve horses—all these in one long procession, winding onwards by forced marches, pushing forward day and night, snatching a little repose now and then in inconvenient and often barbarous lodgings—all this Leopold had endured, day after day, and with every hour detested it more.

He sourly recalled all this now as he waited for Christian, who had spared him all the trouble and responsibility of these pompous and energetic movements; and he remembered how he had flattered the man for this—been grateful to him for sparing him trouble and exalting his dignity at no cost to himself. And all the while he had been laughed at! His two generals, his two friends, had been arrested without his knowledge, without his hearing of their plight, or being allowed to listen to their justification or appeal.

He had been disdained as a fool and a puppet! Certainly, he had found it agreeable and easy to act the part of a fool and a puppet; but now his position was brought home to him in this manner, he found it detestable. He loathed himself little less than he loathed Christian. Only with relish and delight did he remember Eleanora, safe in Ottenheim.

Christian entered, with his usual serene air of respect.

He had not wished to wait upon the Emperor at this moment, for his hands were full. At the same time, he had no air of hurry or excitement. He waited quietly for what Leopold had to say. He did not believe that any words of the Emperor's could be of the least importance, but it was part of his duty to listen to them; and he always performed his duty with a good grace.

Leopold eyed him with abhorrence, and at once broke into the business in hand.

"I have just heard about Count Guastalla and the Duke of Olivenza," he said; "prisoners in Vienna."

"Certainly, Sire," said Christian. "They are safely in Vienna. Had I known Your Majesty attached any importance to the matter, you would have been informed before."

"Those are mere words," said Leopold, angrily. "You knew that I did attach importance to this affair."

Christian replied, not as if he were justifying himself, but as if he merely stated facts, that the men were incapable and insolent. "Guastalla at least was insubordinate; he was wilfully leaving his valuable baggage and artillery to fall into the hands of the enemy, while he fell back, surrendering post after post. Olivenza, too, conducted himself with the greatest insolence. It was impossible to do otherwise than to arrest them both. When the campaign is over Your Majesty may deal with them."

"I shall deal with them now," said Leopold, rudely. "I shall at once order them to be released; I shall have their commands restored to them; I have been palpably deceived."

Even as he spoke, he knew he spoke in weakness. Christian's wish, not his, was the one that was obeyed in the army. Every one in all his troops, to a man, was behind Christian. What he said would scarcely be listened to.

"That is impossible," replied Christian, briefly; "absolutely impossible, Sire: those gentlemen, like many another in Your Majesty's service, only have their position through reason of their birth. They are in every way inefficient, disaffected and incapable."

"I do not know the details of their misfortune," pro-

tested Leopold, his hostility aggravated by the other's patience.

"But I do," answered Christian. "They have all been put before the Council of War—and when Your Majesty was present. I do not think, Sire, you care to listen to details such as these."

"It was not when I was present," said Leopold. "You know quite well that this whole matter has been conducted behind my back."

"It is idle," said Christian, calmly, "to go into the affair now, Sire; we have our hands full. By the defeats of these two gentlemen, I have been considerably hampered, and I have not been greatly helped in other directions. My plan of campaign pretends a considerable superiority of troops on my part. That was the principle on which everything was founded—that and the presence of the Emperor," he added, with a smile. "What I asked for, and what I was promised, I have not received. The King of Prussia is becoming exasperated. We are weak in light troops. I asked for a hundred and twenty battalions, and I have only received a hundred, of those only ninety-two trained troops, the rest mere raw levies. I should have, Sire, at least another thirty battalions of tried men; forty squadrons of cavalry and five of dragoons have come up from Flanders, but even these do not augment my forces to the number which I could wish."

"It is useless for Your Highness," said Leopold, sullenly, "to give me these details now. I have done all I can."

"That I know," said Christian, still smiling; "that is the worst part of my misfortune, that Your Majesty has done all you can. It is as well, however," he added, pleasantly, "that you, Sire, should know the limit of your effort. I hardly credit that you have read my memoranda for the rendezvous on November 1st. I have not sufficient men, and, for the generals—most of them are of but mediocre talent. Some of them are old men who have been through as many as thirty campaigns. They have noticed little and learned nothing. Among the officers, as among the men, only half

of the number at my disposal I count upon as being of real, military value. Alike among Frenchmen, Austrians, Spanish and Germans, you will find men who have been promoted solely through their rank, because they are of royal or of noble blood. Some of them are fops and fools, and most of them vain, arrogant and unmanageable."

"You appear to manage them, however," said Leopold, bitterly. "As for your memoranda, why read what I cannot alter?"

"I keep a firm hand," said Christian, ignoring the sneer. "Some of them are my friends, and some of them are good cavalry officers. I can count on De Lisle, and some of the Frenchmen. There again, many of them are princes of the blood, and quite impossible to direct; they are useless amateurs."

Leopold knew the hidden trouble here; it was Christian's birth which stuck in the arrogant minds of the French princes of the blood, and in the minds of many of the generals composing his staff. Leopold had not the courage to say this, though, with Christian's recent offence fresh in his mind, he would have much liked to do so.

"I have," continued Christian, patiently, "several good general officers, who may be respected for their services and who conduct their divisions quite well; but I am not seconded by any very able or energetic men. Nor, Sire, is any one's heart very much in this campaign. Even De Lisle does not much care which way the war swings, as long as it sends him back to his estate in Touraine. I have had," he added, "to raise forced levies of peasants, who are only insufficiently armed. I have had to weaken every garrison I have left behind me, and to leave several frontiers most insufficiently protected."

"But why?" asked Leopold. "What is the reason of this?"

"To gather together sufficient men to march on Brussels," replied Christian patiently. "Your Majesty has heard this discussion; you have heard it decided upon. It is foolish for us to talk about it now. Nothing will do us any durable

good but decisive battle. That must and will be gained; but I must implore Your Majesty, while the fate of it hovers in the balance, that you will leave what has been done and cannot be undone."

Leopold made a weary movement of his hands to his brow, and Christian continued, in the same serene tone:

"The Dutch await the English reinforcements. The troops on the Rhine have not continued their movements. They are, however, raising fresh regiments, and may any moment be again on the march. Our agents tell me that the Dutch have forty battalions and forty-six squadrons and that there are more than six battalions of the Hanoverians; and twenty-six English battalions—which is to say, in all over a hundred battalions, and nearly a hundred squadrons. It is fortunate for us that a great number of these troops, and nearly all the contingent sent to the Queen of Hungary, have to be employed in fortifying the towns along the other side of the Rhine. They are also our superior in cavalry and in artillery. I tell Your Majesty all this to remind you once more that my hands are full."

The words, though spoken with perfect pleasantness, were like a rebuke in the ears of Leopold. He knew the immense superiority of Christian in these matters; the soldier was a vigorous worker, full of energy, intelligence, force of judgment; acquainted with the least detail of his profession; an adept in all the arts and sciences appertaining to the art and science of war. He made no mistakes; he overlooked nothing. Leopold felt that in his hands his cause was safe; and yet he detested him, as he had not detested him since that day at Dürsheim. All the enmity which had been sleeping between them during these last weeks of hurried movement and rapid preparation broke forth again, and with a bitterer violence.

"I do not wish to hear these things," he flung out, peevishly.

"But Your Majesty must hear them," said Christian. "I tell you them in order that you may not distract yourself with the affairs of Olivenza and Guastalla. Let that rest till

the end of the campaign. And then, Sire," he added, ironically, "when the war is over, you may if you please reinstate them both as Field-M Marshals in your army. No doubt in peacetime they will make pretty ornaments at your court."

"I cannot let it go at this!" cried Leopold, with pale dignity.

But Christian would not listen to more. With the utmost patience, yet with the utmost resolution, but not without a calm menace, he said:

"Sire, I mean to threaten Mons, Charleroi and Tournay. We must advance almost immediately. It is impossible for me to do anything if I am distracted thus by petty details. Sire, your place would be at the head of the troops. As I said, we make a forced march on these places. They are our objectives; in three or four days we should be there, and have them surrounded before they have time to get in the harvest, or any manner of provision. To invest these three towns simultaneously is certainly to draw the Allies to a pitched battle: that battle must be a victory for you, Sire, and after the victory will come the fall of Brussels. The plan is simple."

It was, even to Leopold's unaccustomed ears, bold.

"It seems that you stake all on one throw," he said, doubtfully, having forgotten for the moment even the affair of Olivenza and Guastalla.

"It is that, Sire," replied Christian, "or wasting months in marches and counter-marches in dull and purposeless manœuvres. Your Majesty must now give me leave, as I have to see the Marquis de la Faye, the Maréchal des Logis, who has before ably seconded me, and in whom I have every confidence. I have to make with him the final arrangements for a concentration camp between Charleroi and Mons. We leave, Sire, within an hour or so." He added, not without amused malice, "If Your Majesty would deign to grasp my scheme it might recommend itself more to you."

He had some papers quickly out of his pocket and set them before Leopold's most reluctant and antagonistic gaze.

"Sire, if you have time to squander, let it be in digesting some of these rude notes which will show soberly your position."

Leopold's clouded and sullen glance fell on the rigid lines of neat, clear writing, regular rows of words like picked troops:

Chemay, etc.

As to Luxemburg, their lines of communication will be cut off . . . it is possible they also will fall into the power of the Emperor.

Westphalia

Hanover being destitute of fortified places an offensive in Westphalia would give some concern to the Court at London. . . .

The King of Prussia, by November, should have 120,000 men. . . .

The troops of the King of France in the High Palatinate must combine with those of the Emperor. . . .

Passau, on the Danube, is the key of Austria, we hold it . . . therefore a juncture between the armies in Bavaria and Lower Austria.

Piedmont

Detach the King of Sardinia.

Bavaria has been ruined because she was not fortified—the King of Prussia will have Silesia, he cares not how; watch Kurland.

At that word Leopold looked up; here was a palpable weakness at which he could strike.

"Watch Kurland, eh?" he sneered. "So, through all these confusions you grope after your own elevation!"

"I serve for Kurland," replied Christian, unmoved.

"A meagre return for an Empire!" cried Leopold, taking up the notes again. "One province for so many—but I forgot—you have been paid already."

Half his rancour faded when he considered Eleanora; she, like Kurland, was still unpossessed; town and woman

might alike prove a vaporous *ignis fatuus* to Christian; Leopold, to hide the expression in his eyes, bent over the notes again; Eleanora, a waving brightness, flickered between him and the dry details.

Neither the English nor the Dutch will be sensibly touched by conquests in Flanders, these gratify the King of Spain—attack these Powers in their own territories and reduce them to peace, especially give a lesson to these base republicans who have no right to exist at all—Breda—Bergen-op-Zoom, Hanover, Treves.

The frontiers of Hainault and Champagne require a good corps of troops.

Conclusion. Have we sufficient troops for all this? 20,000 Swedish mercenaries would do wonders; no lack of engineers, hay and enthusiasm; the regiment of the Prince de Ligneville is likely to be disobedient. Have we enough material for the construction of bridges? M. de Sahel spoke of two months before more fusees and bombs could be delivered. Find another man; platforms for cannon, transport; raise two new regiments.

Baffled anger and tedium again overcame Leopold; he dashed the notes from the table to the floor.

Christian, watching him, said: "Sire, you appear to follow some unstable train of fancy."

He spoke with the utmost deference, and yet with the air of a man who is in command. Leopold bit his full under lip in silence. He felt himself defeated and humiliated. The situation was unbearable. Pale with nervous tension, he rose and began to walk up and down. Though for the last few days his feelings had been lulled, they were now raging. He would have given anything to be out of all this. He did not want to fight; he did not want to go forward; he did not want to play this other man's game for the paltry prize of a crown that he did not desire; he did not grasp what he had just read; he returned to his grievance.

"Your Highness appears," he said, nervously, "to have disobeyed and flouted me without as much as an excuse, without as much as asking pardon."

"I have no excuses to make and no pardon to ask, Sire," smiled Christian. "I have done as I was obliged to do."

He had only listened to Leopold out of civility and

spoken to him and shown him his notes out of a sense of duty. Now he had no more time to give him. He knew that Leopold might talk for another hour, incoherent protests and feeble complaints. He was, of course, quite powerless to reinstate the two disgraced generals. Christian, therefore, put that out of his occupied mind. When he was full of his work, he had a habit of putting everything else out of his mind; and, as in the case of Gabor not long ago, he utterly failed to realize the fury of hatred he had aroused in another man's heart, and the possible potency of that same hatred. It never occurred to him that Leopold, walking up and down, pale and agitated, looking (as he thought to himself, not without compassion) like a sick boy, was capable of cherishing against him any malevolent and deadly passion. At times he could feel a furtive pity for such a disposition in such a position; and now, at the door, he turned back to speak what he intended to be words of encouragement. It was no wish of his to have Leopold distressed or humiliated in his own opinion. He wished to see him as a brave figure to parade before the troops. Always, in his consideration, the presence of the king or emperor for whom the men fought was worth a great deal to the spirit of the army.

"Your Majesty will see matters from a different angle when you are in Brussels," he suggested.

Leopold shook his head impatiently. Brussels had been in the hands of the enemy since the outbreak of the war. It would need to be a shattering defeat that could make them relinquish it now.

"And after Brussels, Bavaria," added Christian, pleasantly. "And after Bavaria, the Coronation at Frankfurt; and, after that—well, Vienna, and winter quarters, if Your Majesty pleases! And, we hope, the Protocol of Peace."

Even Leopold's anger was soothed by the authority and confidence in these words. For a moment he thrilled at the thought of being himself a victor, a conqueror—an Emperor indeed; but the thrill of joy soon disappeared into a pang of hate when he realized that he would owe all these

glories to the man before him—who, when it was over, would go to Ottenheim.

Christian left him with a salute of the most profound respect, which Leopold scarcely returned.

"I might have known," he muttered to himself; "I might have known—a man like that!"

He wondered where Gabor was. For days he had not seen the Transylvanian, nor dared to ask Hensdorff the whereabouts of his agent. For all he knew, Gabor might have penetrated the enemy's lines as a spy or be somewhere in disguise on the territory held by the Allies. It was almost impossible for him to acquaint himself with the movements of so obscure a personage. Leopold had no confidant and no servant on whom he could rely. Always his life had gone by chance and hazard; always he had been isolated by conflicting circumstance. There was no one now in whom he could confide such a matter as this; his mind wavered to the prisoners in Vienna.

The sole definite action possible to him was to write to Fürth, and even this he hesitated to do; for what could he tell this man, who had thus appealed and thus reproached him with that one dreadful line: "I was your father's friend!" Nothing. All he could do was to send false promises that he would not be able to redeem, or feeble consolations which ill became his august position. If he, as the Emperor, could not release his friends, it was idle to send them sympathetic messages.

The troops were rapidly leaving the town. Leopold delayed so long in his room that at last Hensdorff came to find him, brushing impatiently aside the valets and gentlemen of the bedchamber, who lingered and lounged in the anteroom.

"Sire, you always delay!" cried Hensdorff, with an ill temper that he could barely control; "and every delay is more deadly than the last."

The young man answered, with weary sloth:

"What do I care, Hensdorff, about delays? None of this is of any matter to me. I care not if you take Brussels

or no. I only desire to be free of all importunities."

Hensdorff disregarded these words, which he took to be an expression of peevish weakness.

"We have engaged in this now," he remarked, drily, "and none of us can turn back. We are already far advanced into the country held by the enemy, Sire, and we have hardly enough troops to hold the lines of communication indefinitely."

Leopold was sullenly silent. Hensdorff, like Christian, was ignorant how far his weakness was being goaded, how near he was to violent, impulsive and desperate action—the frantic gesture of the trapped and cornered.

"Where is that fellow Gabor?" asked Leopold, suddenly. "Of late I have not seen him."

Hensdorff was baffled, surprised.

"I employ Ferdinand Gabor," he said, "and he acquits himself with resolution, secrecy and promptitude. Why did Your Majesty wish to know of his whereabouts?"

"I wish to see him," said Leopold, dully. "Contrive that he sees me, and secretly. I also have my own affairs, Hensdorff, cipher as I am."

"But surely not with Ferdinand Gabor?" demanded Hensdorff, disconcerted by these giddy vagaries.

"Precisely with him," replied Leopold.

TWENTY-FIVE

MOVING with unhesitating rapidity, Christian, well within the time he had allowed himself, arrived at the rendezvous for the army near Tournay and Mons in early November. He had been well seconded by Linz and his engineers, and on new pontoons, his troops had crossed the Rhine without much molestation from the enemy, who had not been able to do more than menace the Imperialists by a vague fire from the distant fort on the opposite bank. The Dutch, alarmed, reluctant and lethargic, had fallen back across their own frontiers, after waiting in a hesitant manner for English reinforcements which did not arrive.

Arroya and Châterault had kept the Hanoverians and the English troops occupied; they had even gained some slight advantage, capturing a train of artillery and a quantity of baggage which had been cut off the main body of the Hanoverian army.

Prince Christian had divided his troops and advanced in two movements, converging towards Mons. These attracted the attention of the enemy, and produced the desired diversion. The Allied generals, who had been exactly informed by their agents of Christian's project on Tournay, were informed that he appeared to be investing Mons, and threw in front of this place a considerable force. The English general had decided, at a hurried Council of War, to succour Mons at all costs; but while they were advancing with all possible expedition and power to the rescue of that important fortress, Christian had turned round, his two wings had joined, and had thrown themselves before Tournay and Ath. Tournay was immediately invested on the side of Brussels. The Uhlans, the Polanders, the Black Cuirassiers and the Hussars began steadily to cross the Maas without opposition; the heavy artillery had already

parked, and the advance guard under Knittelfeldt, lately promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-General, was charged with the investiture of Tournay, while Christian came up with the main body of the Imperialists and the French. The weather was set fair, and rendered the task of the engineers in getting all these troops across the Maas all the more expeditious; in two days the light artillery and the baggage was over the river; at one o'clock the same morning, despite a brisk fire from the citadel, the trenches were opened by Knittelfeldt before Tournay, exact to the arranged date. By the next dawn, Christian saw his audacious plan, so deliberately matured, so promptly put into action, come to fruition. The enemy, finding they had been deceived by a feint, turned round from Mons and marched on Tournay. Before this town was completely invested, the Allies were in sight of the Imperial camp. All had occurred exactly as Christian had foreseen, and wished; he was in precisely the position in which he had planned to be: he had drawn the enemy as he had wished to draw them. Even with all his long-practised control, he could scarcely conceal his exultation.

The main body of the Imperialists was five leagues from Tournay, at the little town of St. Omer, which stood on the right bank of the Scheldt and was crowned by a circlet of forests. Behind were fields, marshy in the wet weather, but dry and powdery now; and massive woods which spread to the undulating horizon. Two streams divided the camp, and on the banks of one of these was a large farm and country house, the Maison de Bleclers.

Christian, who looked over every detail himself, was persuaded that the enemy, coming from Ath and Mons, would not approach by the northeast, but would come on him through the woods of Barry and along the banks of the Scheldt towards Tournay. A personal inspection of all possible roads had shown him those which were impracticable, and those along which the Allies might march. He was, therefore, well prepared to meet them, with the town behind him and the streams in front. Convinced that the

enemy would penetrate through the woods of Barry, where the roads were excellent, and which was itself on the direct way from Ath and Mons, Christian assembled before this wood the main body of his army.

He had chosen for his camp a flat piece of ground where there were at least two leagues where the cavalry could manœuvre perfectly. He was protected on one side by the wood, behind by the town invested by his own troops, and in front, in some sort, by the two considerable streams which flowed into the Scheldt.

He began at once to fortify this camp, to raise redoubts and dig trenches, and to either destroy or to use, as part of his scheme of defence, all the houses, farms and cottages within the circle of his camp. Posts were thrown out to occupy all the neighbouring villages; there was a complete line of communication between the Imperial Forces for a distance of several leagues; the way was held behind them as far as the Rhine; the enemy had no base or magazine on the banks of the Scheldt; an unaccountable oversight but they had been confident that the Imperialists would not penetrate so far.

Not all the general officers approved Christian's plan of action; there were many murmurs and some open dissent at the hastily summoned Council of War. The position was criticized. If the enemy did not advance where Christian supposed they would advance, through the woods at Barry, the Imperialists' communication would have been threatened; and some French officers spoke of the possible abandonment of the not too strongly held lines in the Valenciennes direction, thus leaving open the road to France.

"It is all very well," grumbled Knittelfeldt, "if one were certain of victory; but in case of a defeat, where is our retreat? We shall be beaten back from the walls of Tournay on to the banks of the Scheldt."

But Christian was not preparing for a defeat. He detached himself as much as possible from his *entourage*, and went his way in silence, keeping his eye on all and heeding none. That he would not be too well seconded he knew

perfectly. He also knew perfectly that a certain amount of obedience he could always exact. No one would dare to go too openly or boldly against him.

News came that the Hanoverians were advancing with the purpose of reinforcing Mons; Christian was not disturbed. He was confident that Tournay would fall in a day or so, and that then, unless previously attacked, he could advance with all his forces to relieve the other fort; but he hoped and believed that he would be attacked. His object was not even the taking of important towns, but the winning of a decisive battle.

"The presence of the Emperor," he remarked, pleased with the spirit of the troops, "is worth five hundred thousand men, not only for the effect on our own soldiers, but for the impression it makes upon the enemy."

Indeed, the presence of Leopold, who made a fine enough appearance riding from post to post with his immense escort, galloping in all his bravery along the lines of the camp, heartened and inspired the Imperialists, exalting both their hopes and their valour.

For days the Allies and the Imperialists manœuvred and counter-manœuvred, changing troops from here to there, cautiously placing and replacing the squadrons, without any losses either side. The Allies only threatened to relieve Mons. As they moved away from this town, Prince Christian recalled the Royal Cavalry of France and the Dragoons which had been sent to threaten that citadel. When the enemy appeared before Roubaix Christian sent fifty squadrons to meet them; the enemy hesitated, then retired without investing that town. They turned aside from the road to Tournay, and made their concentration camp between Hal and Brussels; then, in slow detachments advanced by Eng-hien, Miramont and Lessine, formed a junction with the Dutch coming down from Oudenarde and at last turned towards Tournay and the headquarters of the Imperialists.

While he was at supper on the eighth of November, Christian received news of this approach of the enemy. Leopold and his household and his Guards were accom-

modated in one of the largest of the farmhouses; their pavilions stretched all over the trampled cornfields, where the grain had not yet been cut. With a leisure and calm that many of his generals regarded as excessive—an affectation—Christian rode up to this grange to acquaint his sovereign of the approach of the Allies. His cool serenity was no artificial posture; for days everything had been ready to the last detail. He could see no reason for agitation or hurry; he remarked that the enemy would probably be fatigued and would not wish to begin battle at once. They had marched, he said, seventy-five kilometres in eleven days—so exactly and carefully had he been informed of their proceedings, so carefully had he noted distances.

Without a trace of his inner satisfaction, for his early plan had been carried out to the letter, he gave Leopold the news which had just been brought in by Croatian scouts.

Leopold received the information sullenly: he had lately found it difficult to maintain his usual courtesy with his Generalissimo, so deeply had the affair of his two disgraced generals estranged him from this detested soldier.

"Sire," remarked Christian, "everything is in readiness, and Your Majesty may take your usual repose, the attack will not be, at earliest, before ten to-morrow."

"I shall be glad," replied Leopold, not looking at him, "of action at last."

He rose, yawning, picking up his fringed gloves.

"I do not wish for any repose," he added, coldly. "I am bored and weary with waiting and resting. I shall be glad to accompany Your Highness round the lines."

"That would hearten the men, no doubt," agreed Christian, sincerely. "I shall be obliged if Your Majesty will do so."

They passed out through the modest door of the humble farm into the cold clearness of the night. The stars gathered up in the dark blue heavens seemed tremendous, and to hang down, like lamps, low into the bare trees that crowned the low hill of St. Omer.

Two battalions of Imperial Guards were outside the farm, to guard the *entourage* of Leopold and his royal person.

He marked this precaution on the part of Christian with a certain sneer. He could never now see any evidence of his supposed might and splendour without a sneer.

When they were both mounted, Christian pointed out to him, civilly and as a matter of duty, but without much enthusiasm as to his understanding, all the dispositions he had made for the supposed battle. Four cannon were placed at each bridge head; Count de Rougefert occupied St. Omer with seven battalions, nineteen squadrons and eight pieces of cannon—all the little houses and farms which had not been destroyed were fortified and occupied, some by as many as eight battalions and eight pieces of cannon. The body of the army was ranged behind St. Omer, where eighty-four squadrons of cavalry were placed in two lines, the right at three hundred paces behind St. Omer, the left near the woods of Barry. On the heights behind were fifteen squadrons of Dragoons, on the Mons road a regiment of Black Hussars watched for the possible approach of the enemy. Behind the left of the cavalry, thirty battalions were arranged in two divisions, one to the right and the other to the left of the woods of Barry. There were four cannon in the centre of the first division, and eight squadrons behind.

The French troops were encamped between this line and the village church, Our Lady of the Woods. Further behind, twelve battalions formed the second line of infantry; they had fourteen pieces at their left, between the church and the woods; they protected the reserves, the baggage and the road to Ath.

"I do not think," remarked Christian, as he rode round these lines with the Emperor, explaining all with so much indifferent courtesy, "that there is anything forgotten, or anything out of place. The enemy may be no further than three-quarters of a league away, but we are ready for them."

And, with a smile, he pointed out to Leopold the direction of Lille, where he had taken all dispositions for a retreat in case of a defeat.

"That Your Majesty," he added, "can retreat more quickly in case of necessity across the last bridge, it will be

perpetually guarded by the three brigades of Guards."

Leopold rode through the little woods at the top of the hill behind the church, and saw below him the beautiful plain, twelve leagues across, now entirely covered by his troops; he knew that by now all the officers had received their orders, and that many of them were vehemently criticizing Christian. Few of them believed that he was correct in his supposition as to the point of attack that would be chosen by the enemy. Three-quarters of the army were persuaded that there were too many troops in the right and the centre, and that if the enemy made a false attack at the right during which he could render himself master of the bridges, and then brought his real attack on the left, they would be greatly embarrassed, and have their communication with Lille cut off.

Despite themselves, they were impressed by the coolness and the judgment shown by Christian, and also by his brilliant and unflawed reputation; but their own reason gave him the wrong. They could not believe that his audacious penetration was correct.

All his plans rested upon the point chosen by the enemy to attack. And if he was wrong, if the Allies did not advance through the woods of Barry, but circled round Tournay and took them on the left, then the vaunted victory would become a defeat, and the campaign would be ended disastrously before it was well begun.

At half past three in the morning, Leopold returned to his quarters at the grange. He had been impressed by Christian's exact preparations, by his superb self-confidence; but in his heart he had not been thinking of the coming battle at all, but only as to how he might obtain an interview with Gabor and send by him some message to Eleanora in Ottenheim.

So far, this had not been possible, and he did not dare again to ask Hensdorff as to how he might see the Transylvanian. He tried to sleep, and when Father St. Nikola visited him he tried to pray—but both endeavours were in vain. He was in no mood either for slumber or prayer.

A deep excitement took hold on him: hardly the excitement of the coming contest with the enemy, with the English and the Hanoverians and the Dutch, the Allies; no, these to him were vain figures, almost a phantom army. The real combat was the combat that he both dreaded and longed for—was that, not with a host, but with one prevailing man. It was Christian who was his real enemy—not these advancing hordes of strangers.

At half past eight he breakfasted with his suite. There had still been no news of the Allies. At ten o'clock, Leopold mounted again and rode once more round the lines, where everything was in such exact readiness. With only a small escort, he galloped to the most advanced outpost, looking coldly over the chill autumn landscape, the grey length of the river and the grey height of the sky.

In the distance, and on the other bank of the river, was a small skirmish taking place between his own light patrols and those of the enemy. Further still, the dull smudge of smoke and the dull gloom of flames showed in the universal colourless grey: these were the houses, farms and cottages and windmills being burnt and abandoned by the raiding Imperialists and occupied by the advancing enemy. As he remained immobile on his smooth bay horse, watching these events as if they belonged to another age and almost to another world than his own, he was met by Christian, who had spent the night bivouacking in the middle of his Uhlans behind the first line of cavalry. Leopold glanced at the village of St. Omer, with the little church with tall, frail towers, white houses with their red-tiled roofs, and the gardens and fields surrounding them, all now dry and barren with the approaching cold of winter. He glanced further at the distant walls of Tournay, behind this, where the Hanoverian flag floated, and then at the grey width and strength of the river flowing sluggishly by the elaborate encampment.

"There seems to me," he remarked, drily, "one great fault in your preparations, Monseigneur. It is apparent even to my unaccustomed eye. And this fault is that, if we are

defeated, there will be nothing for us to do but to throw ourselves into the river."

Christian, who had studied so patiently and organized so exactly every detail, only bowed, and demanded of Leopold where he could take up his position.

"I was not mistaken," he remarked, without triumph; "the enemy are advancing exactly where I thought they would advance, and Your Majesty need have no fear about a possible defeat or a possible retreat."

"How many men have we?" asked Leopold, with cold curiosity.

"Thirty-five thousand infantry," replied Christian, immediately; "fourteen thousand cavalry; at the utmost, I think, we have only forty-nine thousand men. Those effectively under arms are no more than forty-seven thousand. The total of the Allies must be at least sixty thousand men, and in artillery they are even more superior than I had believed. In light cavalry we have the advantage."

Leopold listened to all this with an odd indifference—even with an odd coldness; none of it seemed to matter to him. He was not in the least exalted by all these preparations the end of which was his glory. He was even astonished at his own apathy. The whole thing seemed to him unreal, like some fantastic painting or the drop scene of a theatre. There had been a slight morning mist, the result of a ground-frost. Little by little, this raw haze was lifted, and Christian gave him his perspective glasses and told him to look through towards the woods of Barry.

Leopold could plainly see, deploying through the bare trees, the sombre lines of the Dutch infantry, and the more brilliant ranks of the English troops. All night, and under cover of the light morning fog, the Allies had been taking up their positions.

It was now about half past twelve, and the mist creeping up from the ground seemed to densify into clouds, which, rising slowly, obscured the pallid winter blue and the faint winter sun.

Christian looked keenly over the whole length of his

prepared entrenchments. The Allies took up the position of attack. Christian, through his glasses, watched the infantry getting into their place. Then he spoke to one of his aides-de-camp, giving his preconcerted signal. The aide-de-camp galloped away, and almost immediately, so perfect was the chain of communication, all the Imperialists' fire leaped out towards the woods of Barry.

Leopold had been unprepared, his horse plunged, and he started as the terrific noise tore to shreds the placid air and the delicate silence of the winter morning. The artillery of the Allies replied immediately, though in a desultory fashion—they had not yet their pieces in place.

"They mean to attack in full force," said Christian, lowering his glasses. "The Dutch advance on St. Omer."

He sent the three officers behind him immediately off with his last instructions for the battle, telling them to ride from rank to rank and see that his orders were being executed with precision and fidelity; then he turned and galloped with Leopold to the prearranged post at Luquet, beyond the range of the enemy's artillery, the windmill beside the little stream that ran into the Scheldt. He left Leopold by the windmill, where was already the Emperor's escort of Imperial Guards and a number of staff officers, several German princes, and members of the Royal House of France. The King of Prussia was leading his own men, and Christian turned and rode alone at full gallop round the field, giving his last orders in person before he took up his position at the head of his own Uhlans in the centre of the position before St. Omer.

The enemy were moving with decision and vigour, and Christian had given the orders for a prompt counter attack. Leopold, sitting rigid and magnificent by the distant windmill, soon saw nothing definite; in a quarter of an hour the whole prospect was blotted out by smoke, torn by red blaze; the landscape had vanished in greyness and thunder; officers kept riding up with news; they told him that the Dutch in the woods of Barry had soon been disposed of: they had fallen back before the French troops, the Black

Cuirassiers and the Austrian Hussars with little loss to themselves, and had at once abandoned their proposed attack on St. Omer. The English, thus badly seconded, were in some confusion, but the Hanoverians had come to their support, and the battle was still in the first stage of indecision on the edges of the woods, on the banks of the river.

Leopold stared at his round diamond watch hanging from a ribbon on his breast. The engagement had lasted barely an hour, but he had lost the sense of time; noise, fire, darkness flowed past him. He sat there immovable, pale, magnificent, at once too scared and too useless to engage in the violence of the action. Being the Emperor, he could not lead his troops himself; being an inexperienced and amateur soldier, it would have been of no use if he had done so. He had placed himself openly under the command of Christian, resigning to him the leadership of his own men; and Christian had bade him remain here—a figurehead, with all the brilliance and glory of the Royal French House, and all the glittering German princelings, many of whom looked anxious as to the result of the action, in affluent attendance.

Leopold had seen many a battle before, and always with the same sense of detachment. Though he was soft-hearted and sentimental, in the moment of actual conflict these feelings vanished. It was all so unreal, so false; he could hardly believe that it was really happening about him; death, destruction, horror.

He watched the church spire rising deliberately above the dense mass of thick smoke; he saw the circling of the cavalry and the preconcerted movements of the troops through rifts in this smoke, taking place exactly, despite the heavy firing; he saw the men fall and lie in heaps; the riderless horses; the staggering ranks; the charge of the pikemen; the continuous fire of the musketeers; and again the wheeling-up of the cavalry, the rattle, the plunge and whistle of the cannon and shot. He heard the beating of the drums and the sound of the trumpets, the raucous notes of command.

Knittelfeldt rode up, his bloated face pallid.

"It goes ill enough," he cried, "and I should advise Your Majesty to retreat across the river while we can hold the bridge head."

Leopold heard this news with a certain bitter satisfaction; even if this was a defeat that was going to mean annihilation for him, at least it would mean humiliation for Christian. Almost he wished his general would lose this most important engagement—after his arrogant braggadocio in choosing a position with his back to the river.

"The English," added Knittelfeldt, breathlessly, "fight with incomparable obstinacy. Though they are in some disorder by the retreat of the Dutch, the French do not do very well."

Balls were now falling all about them and a bomb burst a few feet away; Leopold refused to move from his position, though this was fast becoming dangerous as the action surged in his direction, the Allies pushing the Imperialists back across their own trenches. This was not due to courage on his part, though he had enough of that, but to a complete indifference; his soul felt frozen in his rigid body.

As he watched, he seemed to see the actual tide of fortune fluctuate to and fro. Now a wave of men and flags and horses in one direction, now in another. Some of the woods caught fire; dry trees flamed like giant torches. The roar of the cannon became incessant; there was hardly a pause of a second between one volley and another. He could not distinguish the enemy's guns from his own. He remembered the fireworks at Berlin as he saw the balls leap into the air, reflected in the grey russet hue of the wide river; and all this wide, violent, tumultuous and dreadful scene became faint and vague to Leopold as he sat there, motionless as a sentry, in his Imperial post.

More real to him than this prodigious combat was his inner vision, a memory of those woods of delicate beech, that girl in thin muslin, with her basket of strawberries, the sunset light glancing through the trunks, the greenish trunks

of the elegant trees; peace, beauty and comfort there; here, incessant fury of sound meeting and mingling with concentrated fury of action, in contrast how atrocious.

Once he was aware of Christian riding up to him through all the dark smoke and tangled confusion of the desperate engagement now pressing so, and advising him, in tones no more hurried than the usual, to make his retreat across the bridge.

"I do not know that we can do it," said the Generalissimo, serenely, "and if we cannot, it is as well that we should have a preconcerted and well-organized retreat, and that the person of Your Majesty should not be a moment in danger."

But Leopold refused. He looked curiously at Christian, remembering him as he had last seen him in battle outside Belgrade, when he had been able to ignore him.

Christian was hatless; his wrist had been wounded and hastily bound up with strips of his torn ruffle; the baton, scattered with Imperial Eagles, that he carried, was blood fouled; his hair was in disorder, and the knot of his sash had been shot away; his breath was laboured, his face damp with sweat and all his uniform dusty.

"My safety is of no matter to me," remarked Leopold; not without spiteful disdain for the other's loss of his polished, treasured elegance.

"But it is to me," returned Christian, who would as soon have lost his Standard as his Emperor. He added, reflectively: "The French are too vivacious; they charge too hastily, and without thought, and then they are easily swept back—they have little good will."

Frowning, he peered with narrowed eyes through the smoke at the battle, which was not a confusion to him, as it was to Leopold; every point and detail of it he knew exactly; it was his plan, his diagram become alive, familiar to him in all these lines that he had formerly traced in pencil and that were now marked in fire and blood.

He perceived the Swabians giving way on the left, and shouting to the group about Leopold to get the Emperor across the bridge, he galloped back to the action.

Leopold stilled his nervous, leaping horse, curtly putting aside the solicitations of his Staff to follow the advice of Christian.

"If he or I is killed now," he thought, "it would prevent worse things than death."

The forest of Barry was burning; the horizon was a wall of pale fire; the perpetual cannonading shook the ground; Leopold felt his whole soul rouse into a lust of conflict—but not for this frantic combat with armies; it was another struggle in which he would be engaged—one with a single opponent, the man who was leading his troops and his banners now.

TWENTY-SIX

THE engagement had been short; the victory complete. By midday the enemy had fallen back under the guns of Mons and Ath. The well-laid, prudent and yet audacious plans of Christian, seconded by his own personal energy and his tireless enthusiasm, his patience and courage, had gained the day for the Imperialists; though at one moment it had almost seemed as if the force and energy of the English troops, and their superior numbers, would break down the resistance of the French and Austrians.

Leopold had remained rigid in his place, a glittering figure through the gloom; only stirring when he had to calm his excited horse, which reared and plunged when the flashes of fire and the balls leaped through the lurid glare and acrid smoke.

For he could not make the issue of this ferocious and momentous engagement anything personal to himself. He was aware of a dreary sense of tedium, and as the hours passed his head ached from the continuous noise, and his eyes smarted from the powder-tainted atmosphere.

In the murk of the late afternoon, Christian spurred up to Leopold, and told him that the enemy had withdrawn; and added impetuously, as if he were giving a command:

"It is now for Your Majesty to ride round the field and thank the troops, most of whom have done very well."

General Crack did not remark that he had been ill seconded by many of the officers; his sense of discipline told him that this was no moment to be raising such questions, though he had had a hard struggle to overcome the indolence and incapacity of some of Leopold's generals. There had been, in the middle of the battle, a moment of bitter confusion, when orders were not taken in some regiments,

and were not obeyed in others, when the Princes of the Royal House of France had ridden pell-mell into the fray, causing a chaos in Christian's well preconcerted plans. Victory had not been too easy. It was the more admired and the more enjoyed. The light troops pursued the orderly retreat of the enemy, who were drawing off as rapidly as possible through the woods of Barry and behind the hill on which stood the village of St. Omer. They were already disputing fiercely among themselves, as troops of different nationalities will after a check; and in their disagreement and the hurry of their retreat, they left most of their baggage and artillery scattered about the dry fields and the bare woods.

The booty was considerable, and an armful of the Allies' colours were brought to Leopold, as he rode with his Staff over the field.

Though the battle had been so brief, the slaughter had been frightful. For two hours the Imperialists on the flat plateau had been exposed to the raging fire of the Allies, as the Allies had been exposed to their counter fire directed from the heights above the village. The woods were choked and the plain piled with dead and dying; mere tatters and fragments of humanity and horses defiled the sweetness of the chill winter day. Groans and shrieks, prayers and complaints, rose up amidst the peal of the *Te Deum* already being sung, the Lutheran hymns ringing from the hoarse throats of Protestants and the thin cold clatter of the village bells.

Leopold rode slowly round the field, his nervous, frightened horse picking daintily among the heap of maimed and wounded, the gorged trenches, and torn earth. He wondered himself at his insensibility; not the professional insensibility of Christian, who calmly regretted that the enemy's losses were not higher, but the insensibility of one who could not realize what had happened; of one who felt that a vast unreality encompassed him.

He looked for his friends and acquaintances as he went from post to post, and heard that many of them had fallen:

men with whom he had been familiar since he was a boy. He saw the doctors, with their mules laden with cases, proceeding with difficulty from one trench or redoubt to another. He saw the chariots and wagons already piled with agonizing men; and still he knew no sensation of horror or pity.

"Is it," he asked himself, "because my mind, my heart, is so full of another emotion?"

He was amazed at the obvious delight of De Lisle and the other French officers. What, after all, did this victory matter? All this slaughter and pain and agony? They were pleased, these men! They were satisfied, triumphant and exultant. He heard their congratulations, one after another, as they pressed up to him. He smiled mechanically, distributing his civility, his bows, with an indifferent impartiality.

He heard them all praise Christian. Christian had achieved this triumph. Every one now praised Christian. And, hearing these same laudations, Leopold felt his congealed blood burn—not with pleasure now, but with anger.

All this had been for Christian: to exult and glorify him!

Count Hensdorff, who had accompanied the army and was a man of a cool courage, came up to the Emperor and went with him round the field. He seemed deeply concerned.

"It is a pity," he remarked, "that nothing can be accomplished without this ghastly cost. Such are the foundations of thrones and policies!"

But he was the only man who seemed thus impressed by the ferocity of the slaughter.

The King of Prussia was exultant; Leopold watched his deferential manner to Christian. "They all think him a great man," thought the Emperor, "and no one regards me whatever. I am merely the puppet, easy to their hand."

When, however, he at length met Christian face to face in the midst of the shattered redoubts, he knew his duty. He had to embrace him publicly before them all, and thank him in the most gracious terms he could command for those hymns of victory now ringing above the bloody and dis-

puted field. But he could not resist adding, after the facile courtesies with which he addressed his victorious general:

“Your Highness will no doubt find your reward.”

Yes, he thought, grimly, there would be rewards enough—triumphs and kingdoms, honours, stars and crosses; and, at the end of all, that girl at Ottenheim—the spring on the banks of the Danube.

Christian was not much affected by all these flattering plaudits; he had been victor on many a field, and the engagement had been too brief to fatigue his superb physique or to excite his even mind. His strength and health were heroic, and he found such actions as these stimulating instead of exhausting. He knew, too, that the best part of his work still lay before him. The Allies had not been so smitten that they would not at once rally again. And his objective had not been Tournay, which now was sure to capitulate, but Brussels; and he was still some distance from Brussels.

He responded agreeably, however, to the compliments of Leopold; he had been pleased by the part the Emperor had played. That glittering figure, rigid by the windmill through the smoke of battle, was exactly the symbol that Christian had wanted—some one who would do nothing, and appear to be everything, was his ideal of a master and a king.

Leopold also was well trained in affable compliments, and Christian approved the manner with which he distributed smiles and civilities. Such an Emperor—comely, amiable and young—would soon be popular; and the more popular he was, the more would his task be easy and swift in accomplishment.

Though Christian had made every arrangement for the comfort of the wounded, and his medical service was excellently organized, he regarded the horrid sights which covered the field with callous indifference, and was little moved even at the first list of the illustrious dead and wounded which was presented to him. He handed this list to the Emperor, remarking:

"Some of these gentlemen need not have lost their lives had they not so rashly left their places without orders."

Leopold stared vaguely across the horrible field. He watched the dead men being carried past the hillock where he had stayed his restive horse: many of them men with whom he had dined only yesterday. And the whole scene had a certain grotesqueness. It seemed impossible for him to take either himself or the battle seriously. With an ironic smile, he asked Christian his further plans.

The Generalissimo replied immediately:

"Sire, Tournay will, of course, fall at once; then I mean to cross the Marne and take Brussels. I had intended a blockade, but now I think that I will take the city by assault. The Allies are, at least for the moment, discomfited, and I do not think the garrison is very strong. With Brussels, Your Majesty will have the Spanish Netherlands. We must then sweep the enemy out of Bavaria and the Palatinate. Tournay should be occupied to-night," he added, "and by the dawn we should be again on the march. The men are mostly in good condition, and will require little rest; the wounded can be left at Tournay."

As he had predicted, the white flag hung out from the citadel of Tournay that night; but Leopold remained in his headquarters, and slept in the grange, on the farmer's bed with a straw mattress. He left it to his Generalissimo to receive the keys of the conquered town, to watch the garrison march out with the honours of war, and to occupy the fort with his own troops.

Early in the grey, bleak morning, Hensdorff came to see him, and told him that the troops were already on the move; Leopold knew this; his rest had long been disturbed by the sounds of breaking camp.

"It all seems no concern of mine," he said with a wan smile, "since Prince Christian does everything."

"You may well leave it all to him," replied Hensdorff dryly. "He knows his business."

"And I hope," said Leopold, quietly, "that you think I know mine now, Count: that of the obedient puppet."

Hensdorff did not reply; he felt weary and nauseated. Everything to him smelt of blood and powder. He was now a man of the Cabinet, not the field. He had sickened at the sights and sounds he had had to see and hear traversing the encampment to the Emperor's headquarters.

"Does it seem worth while to you?" asked Leopold, curiously. He was adjusting his cravat before the small cracked mirror above the blue earthenware stove of the farmhouse parlour.

"Still in that mood, Sire?" asked Hensdorff, grimly. "God in Heaven! If we stopped to ask if things were worth while . . ."

"I ask it, but I don't stop," said Leopold, sneering at himself. "I go on; I do what I am told. Surely, my dear Count, you are pleased with me!"

"You speak with an odd bitterness, Sire," said the minister, heavily; "surely you got some satisfaction from yesterday? It is pleasant, after all, to be acclaimed! The night after victory has some thrill in it for most men."

"It was not I who was acclaimed," said Leopold, "but General Crack. What other name did you hear but that yesterday? He—ask him if he received any satisfaction. At his feet the rewards will be piled; not at mine—for him the elevation and the ecstasy, not for me."

"You stand to gain an empire," retorted Hensdorff, wearily. "That, after all, must be higher than *his* utmost expectation."

Leopold did not reply to this. He gazed at his reflection in the greenish mirror. He was stung by the effeminacy of his own countenance; never could he glance into a glass without being reminded of his own inadequacy.

"Christian is for marching on Brussels immediately," added Hensdorff. "Bold and daring, but, I think, justified."

"It does not matter what *I* think," said Leopold. "He will do exactly as he chooses."

"That was the bargain," Hensdorff once again reminded him.

"Ah! The bargain!" smiled Leopold. He paused a second, and then he asked inquisitively:

"Do you think, Hensdorff, that, whatever happened, Prince Christian would keep that bargain? Do you think that he is beyond bribe—beyond affront?"

Hensdorff did not understand this; with some impatience, he asked for a clearer explanation. He was vexed that the triumphs of yesterday had not steadied Leopold, and cleared his mind of some of his whims and caprices, his hesitations and indecisions. For himself, he had, like every other man in the camp, been considerably impressed and even awed by the brilliant display of Christian's qualities as man and soldier yesterday. However arrogant and intolerable he might be in times of peace, there could be no possible doubt of his supreme value in times of war. Hensdorff secretly shared the common opinion that Leopold, stately as he might hold himself, cut but a poor figure beside that of the mercenary soldier he employed.

Leopold held his hands out above the stove, which had just been lit and gave out a faint heat. He paused, turning his words over in his mind before he uttered them. Then he said, deliberately:

"I mean, do you think that one might trust Prince Christian? That he might be temptable; that he might be affronted?"

Leopold tried to explain himself more clearly. He looked keenly at Hensdorff.

"I want to know if I could affront him—so deeply that he would leave my service," he asked. "Or, if the Allies were to offer him more than I could offer, he would accept?"

This seemed to Hensdorff a most unnecessary subject to raise. He had not himself the least reason to suspect the fidelity of Christian to his word. He told Leopold so.

"The man will be faithful, not so much to you, Sire, as to his own promise. He has made a bargain, and why should we think he would not keep it? He has had his pay, and he will give good value for it."

"He has had nothing," said Leopold, sullenly and with heavy meaning, "nothing. All these honours and glories are yet in the future; he is not yet Duke of Kurland, he is not *Maréchal de France*, he has no provinces, nor governments."

"He has," said Hensdorff, not knowing that he struck at the very heart of the matter between these two—"he has Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau; and that, I think, was a great bribe for him."

Leopold looked over his shoulder into the small mirror, and stared into his own blue eyes. Hensdorff did not know, perhaps, or remember that that possession was merely nominal.

"Do you think," he asked cautiously, "that she means so much to him, then?"

"Well, it seems obvious," smiled Hensdorff; "it was all he asked for. As you say, Sire, the other things will come afterwards; the fruits of victory. They were doubtful from the first. If he gains them, it must be by his own exertions. That was the price for joining you, for leading your troops; and he has received it and, I believe, will earn it."

"You do not think," mused Leopold, still looking at himself in the mirror, "that I could affront him?"

Hensdorff was impatient.

"Why does Your Majesty keep talking of affront? Surely the last person in the world you would affront would be Prince Christian!"

"I do not like him," said Leopold, softly. "I cannot forgive, Hensdorff—I never shall forgive—the affair of Guastalla and Olivenza."

"Ah, that!" Hensdorff shrugged.

"Well, give me your opinion," insisted Leopold. "You are a clever and a subtle man, Count; you have always been my counsellor. Do you think that Christian, in any circumstances, would be false to me?"

"No," said Hensdorff, bluntly, "I do not. And, as I remarked before, Sire, it is not a question of being false to you, but to his own word. Prince Christian has changed

sides before now, like every mercenary ; but always openly. And I believe that he is very nice in his honour."

"Such nicety," said Leopold, maliciously, "is scarcely expected of those born as Christian. His honour, like his birth, is not immaculate ; beneath all his carefully acquired French airs, his is a coarse and vulgar soul."

"I do not think so," remarked Hensdorff, grimly ; "and I should not advise Your Majesty to think so. Nothing is more likely to insult him than any suspicion of his honour."

Then he asked, with some uneasiness, why Leopold had raised this vexatious question.

"I find it hard to tolerate Prince Christian," admitted Leopold. "I find it hard to tolerate many things, but most of all that man, this showy, insolent adventurer : cruel, rapacious, and I believe, false."

"But he has conducted himself with extreme civility," protested Hensdorff, in surprise. "I cannot understand the pique Your Majesty has against him. He is certainly arrogant, and even insolent ; unscrupulous, and, I suppose, corrupt. Where his honour as a soldier is concerned, however, I do believe that you may absolutely rely upon him. He said that if we resigned to him the Princess Eleanora, he would see you crowned at Frankfurt. And I do believe he will keep his word."

Leopold turned so that his back was to the mirror. "But I," he remarked, as if to himself, "I gave no word. I took no oath. I passed no promise."

"Well, I did !" answered Hensdorff, drily. "I drove a hard and fast bargain with him, and Your Majesty will scarcely be able to go back upon it. Kurland has been promised. I have arranged that with the King of Prussia ; he is only too pleased to exchange Kurland for Silesia. The Franch will make him Maréchal de France. And you must give him some personal favours."

"Oh, all those toys and trifles," cried Leopold, impatiently. "How stupid and how unreal they seem !"

"There I cannot follow Your Majesty," replied Hensdorff, bluntly. "Unreal these things may seem to you, but

they do not to most men; and I can assure you that to men like Christian they are very solid advantages indeed! He has been eating his heart out for Kurland all his life, and after all he is a Ketlar."

"Or would have been," said Leopold, bitterly, "had not his mother chanced to be an Italian light-o'-love."

"For God's sake, Sire," cried Hensdorff, angrily, "don't breathe such words, even between these four walls. There's no man in the camp would dare to say as much, however sure he might be of his companions."

"Is Christian, then, so great?" sneered Leopold.

"They are all in his hands, anyhow," said Hensdorff, brusquely, "and I cannot see in what possible way he has offended Your Majesty."

Count Hensdorff had forgotten, as Christian himself had forgotten, as Anhalt-Dessau had forgotten, that scene at Dürsheim; how they between them had forced this young man; how they had made him do a thing which to him was odious and detestable, and relinquish something to which he had attached himself by the most delicate threads of fastidious imaginings. They had not known, when they were doing it, what it was they did; and now it had gone completely from the minds of all of them—particularly from the mind of Hensdorff. He had always found Leopold whimsical and difficult, and there had been nothing to guide him to the fact that on that occasion Leopold's behaviour had been inspired by more than whims and caprices. Leopold, with shuddering sensitiveness, had hidden his secret so deeply in his heart that Hensdorff had never guessed it. He was, therefore, now in the dark as to what this matter could be between Christian and Leopold, and could only suppose it was that most unfortunate affair of the two disgraced and arrested generals. He began to speak of this, justifying Christian, whose prudence and sagacity, whose judgment and promptitude he could swear might be entirely trusted.

Leopold listened, and was utterly unimpressed. Nothing could take from him that galling sense of hatred towards

Christian. He said at last, as he had said so long ago (long ago it seemed to him, at least), to the hermit in the woods above the Danube:

"It is a dreadful thing to hate any one, Hensdorff: the most dreadful thing that can happen to a man."

"Your Majesty should be set above such passions," replied the minister. "Surely you cannot *hate* Prince Christian?"

And in his heart Hensdorff thought, angrily: "I wish he were my Emperor and not you, you moody boy!"

Leopold appeared to be struggling with himself. The colour crept up behind his fine skin. The hands he still held above the blue stone stove trembled. He looked earnestly at the older man, and earnestly spoke:

"Hensdorff, will you do this service for me? You can speak to Christian—you seem to admire him: no doubt you are in his confidence. Can you tell him something?"

"I dare say I can tell him anything," said Hensdorff. "It is a question what heed he will take of what I say."

"Whether he takes heed or not, I wish that you would tell him this . . ." Leopold paused, bit his full lips, and glanced away as if ashamed of what he was about to say. Then, with an effort, he spoke, and spoke with suppressed passion. "Tell him this, Hensdorff: not to cross me again; not to push me too far; not to flourish overmuch; not to conduct himself with insolence towards me. I may be a cipher, Hensdorff; but my birth is not mean."

Hensdorff was surprised by the tense feeling with which the young man spoke. He had not believed that the affair of the two generals had hit him so hard, nor Christian's bearing galled and vexed him so deeply. "Can you?" insisted Leopold, in a low, intense voice. "Can you tell him that? It would be to the benefit of all of us, Hensdorff."

The minister did not know if this would be in the least a politic message to take to the victorious Generalissimo, who was, he believed, absolutely unconscious of any offence towards his master. He therefore hesitated, trying to get at the mood of Leopold. "Tell him that," insisted the young

man, taking his hands from the vague heat of the stove and putting them into his bosom. "Tell him to be careful, for all our sakes." And he added, almost in a whisper: "There is not much more that I can bear."

"I will tell him," said Hensdorff, puzzled, "but I wish, Sire, you would give me some better understanding of the bottom of all this tumult that you appear to suffer."

"Ah, tumult!" replied Leopold, faintly. "That's the word. I do indeed suffer, Hensdorff; and, as I have said, there is not much more that I can well endure. If I must, for many reasons, go through the part I have taken up, tell Prince Christian not to press me further."

"I will," conceded Hensdorff, doubtfully, "do, Sire, what I can."

Leopold picked up his gloves from the low wooden chair near the stove, and fitted them on carefully, finger by finger. "Do not forget," he said, earnestly. "I beg of you, Count Hensdorff, do not forget—he is so lavishly prodigal in his extravagance in all things—let him be careful at least in this his attitude toward me."

"I will," repeated the minister, "do what I am able in this matter. May I, at the same time, give Your Majesty some advice—and not unimportant advice? Will you, on your part, be careful how you go with Christian? He is, as you know, most arrogant and even insolent. There is little he will endure that savours of a slight. Your Majesty has spoken of affronting him. There, I must implore you to be very prudent, lest this secret humour of yours appears in your gesture or your speech."

Leopold was still busy with his gloves.

"You think," he asked, with a catch in his breath, "you think Prince Christian, then, might be dangerous, after all? Even though he *is* so nice in his honour, and so jealous of his plighted word?"

Hensdorff shrugged and grimaced. "I do not know what the man might do if he were affronted or slighted," he said. "But for the moment I did not think of that. I thought that you, and I, and all of us, Sire, owed something to Christian,

and that it was scarcely decent to permit private dislike to efface gratitude."

Leopold repeated that last word sullenly.

"Gratitude!" he said; "yes, I am supposed to feel gratitude towards him, when this ruthless waste, this hot carnage sickens me." He glanced obliquely at Hensdorff, and added, breathlessly: "Where is that fellow Gabor? I have asked you about him before."

"Gabor," said Hensdorff, "is in Brussels: my principal agent there. I have found him a most able fellow, although I hear that he, as of Prince Christian, has incurred the displeasure of Your Majesty."

"He was in Christian's employ, not mine!" cried Leopold, with some violence. "He came to me with backstair tales of his master, and I sent him away."

"Ah!" said Hensdorff, "now, Sire, you would have him back to hear these tales again, perhaps?"

Leopold coloured swiftly. "It is not for that," he stammered. "I have a mission for the man. I have a matter that only he could deal with."

Hensdorff objected, doubtfully: "Does this touch on politics, Sire?" And Leopold answered, immediately and with scorn: "No, Count Hensdorff; you may be satisfied: I do not mingle in your politics any more than I mingle in the tactics of Prince Christian; but something, I suppose, I may have to myself? There may be some affair in which I may privately interest myself?"

Hensdorff bowed; not without irony.

"Well, then, in such a one I wish the assistance of that Transylvanian, that sly and cunning wretch you find so useful."

"When I next see him I will acquaint Your Majesty," assented Hensdorff, privately resolving to do nothing of the kind. He did not accept Leopold's explanation, but believed what was indeed the truth, that he wished to get hold of Gabor to work some mischief to Christian; though the exact measure and depth of this mischief Hensdorff was far, indeed, from suspecting.

The insistent calls of gathered trumpets broke their speech. Leopold's sumptuous escort was crowding and clanking in the outer room, all in high spirits because of yesterday.

When he realized that the final signal for sudden departure had come, such an expression of loathing and revolt crossed the young man's face that Hensdorff was alarmed.

"I beg you, Sire," he whispered, impetuously, "put a better gloss upon it, whatever your private humour!"

Leopold whispered back, in a tone of passionate emphasis: "Tell Prince Christian to be careful!"

TWENTY-SEVEN

WITHIN a fortnight, Brussels had fallen, and the swift brilliancy of Christian's splendid success echoed throughout Europe. He had also cleared Leopold's hereditary dominions, Bavaria and the Palatinate, of the enemy, who had retreated into Hanover and the Low Countries. Always famous, he had lately become the most notable figure in the theatre of war; that is to say, in the civilized world. He possessed just those qualities, and his triumphs were of just that nature that strike the popular mind. He was, as Hensdorff had remarked, a ready-made hero for the vulgar. He lacked nothing that is generally admired in the man of action. Even his insolent composure and his theatrical graces, often found so unbearable by his equals and superiors, were but added attributes in the eyes of his inferiors; they did not find the noble grace of his prime of manhood marred by his extravagance of splendour.

If not amiable, he was just; if overlavish, at least generous; if insensible and even cruel on occasion, of most unparalleled bravery. In brief, he was soon the idol of the Imperialists, and greatly admired even by the enemy he had so rapidly outwitted and so signally defeated.

At Brussels he laid his plans for the coronation of the Emperor, and wrote a long letter to the Duchess of Schönbuchel.

"My dear Duchess, I may be home even sooner than I had expected." So his letter began. And the old woman who read it found a certain pathos in the use of the word "home" by such a man. Did he call Ottenheim—this gaudy château, adorned with plunder—"home"? A new place, fresh from the builders' hands? The parks just laid out, the pictures and escutcheons just hung up? Was this home to the disinherited man?

She wrote back the most glowing congratulations on his continued and impressive successes. She even forgave the disgrace of her old friend Olivenza, who, after all, she conceded, had behaved very badly.

The Duchess also endeavoured to impress upon the waiting Eleanora something of the substantial glories that her husband was achieving; but here she made little impression. War and all that appertained to war was vagueness itself to the girl. But when she heard her husband's return to Ottenheim spoken of, she winced and shivered a little within herself. But she sent another dutiful little note of congratulation, which Christian received in the midst of his unspeakable triumph in Brussels, and which went to join that other foolish letter of hers in a case of silvered leather which he kept always in his pocket.

During his leisure in the Brabant capital, Christian bought new adornments for his distant château—tapestries and pictures—pictures by Rubens and tapestries from Flanders, lace and statuary, fans of feathers, yards of brocade, stiff with golden thread. His antechamber was crowded by merchants and dealers. He made his purchases with the lavishness of one who could count on the resources of a nation to pay his bills, or else, as one of the officers who did not like him remarked, with the carelessness of one who may fall so low that no accounts will ever be rendered. But the handling of rich fabrics and the judging of glowing pictures was his brief pastime. Mostly he worked, all through the days and partly through the nights. He had the entire administration of the army on his shoulders; he was but feebly seconded by his subordinates, and he allowed no detail to pass without his acute supervision. He knew, and no man better, the peril of the Imperial position. The campaign was still but half won, even with the recovery of Brussels, momentous as that was. The more definitely the Allies were defeated, the more fully and desperately they would rally. Reinforcements were coming from England, new recruits were being raised in the Elector of Hanover's

domain, and the Dutch were gathering in good earnest to defend their beloved flats and swamps.

Christian had no intention of fighting beyond the Imperial dominion; once the enemy were driven back behind their own frontiers, he had no further concern for them. He knew that his own resources would not prevent him from long carrying on an offensive warfare. It was his intention to clear the enemy out of the Emperor's estates, to crown him, and then make a peace on that basis; or, if not a peace, at least a truce. Permanent peace had not been in his experience; all he wished for was a year or so of leisure, in which to enjoy his reward.

For himself, he did not believe that Leopold would long hold the throne, even with the aid of France, who was so lavishly pouring out blood and treasure in his cause; but that was little concern of his. He was quite capable of making his peace and his terms with whatever Prince wore the Imperial Diadem. He had the choice of transferring his entire allegiance to France, or of reigning alone in Kurland and holding that duchy against them all. There were many alternatives open to Christian, and he cared little about the ultimate issue of the combat as long as he could fulfil his promise and redeem his bargain.

He had, by his late impressive successes, extraordinarily consolidated his position and his value. He need never fear to lack honours and employment now. It mattered little to him whether these came from Leopold or another. The King of France had sent him a letter couched in the most flattering terms, and with it the baton of a *Maréchal de France*. He could now wear over his Field-Marshal's uniform the collar of the *Saint-Esprit*, to mingle with that of the *Golden Fleece*.

On the day of the entry into Brussels, Leopold had taken the glitter of his own insignia from his breast, and flung it over the shoulders of the victorious general. He had done this with the easiest and most amiable of gestures, and none could have guessed how his heart revolted within him the while.

But more to him than such sparkling, though trifling, honours, was Kurland. Christian was now assured of Kurland, and his mind roamed over his native province from shore to frontier, considering what he would do with it, how it should be fortified and guarded, exploited, what universities, and churches, and palaces he would build.

And, in the most poignant of his dreams, was the vision of Eleanora in the palace where he had been brought up as a boy. He could picture those incredibly high stairs where she would tread, those deep-set windows from which she would look down, the balconies from which she would view the city, the garden where she would tend the planting of her favourite blooms; and he snatched time, even now, to interview architects and gardeners as to the improvement of this same palace, now shut up, neglected, awaiting his arrival. For both the Polish and the Russian Pretenders had fled at the outbreak of a popular revolution, and the Diet sitting in Mitau had sent a formal invitation to Christian to come and claim his own as soon as the war should permit; he had always been adored in Kurland. They there loyally called him Ketlar, and forgot the blot that others were so maliciously delighted to remember.

There was a gala night at the Opera, where the liberated city must celebrate her deliverance; and Leopold sat in a box with many mirrors to receive the homage of the excited people. The theatre was ringed with lights, like chained and ordered stars, which were reflected in these mirrors of the Royal Box as if in some immense depth of water; Leopold was displayed in a great velvet chair with arms raised a step higher than any of those other chairs. He held a satin programme, on which gleamed gilt names. The air was languid with the scent of hothouse flowers, with the perfume of waxen candles and with enclosed, artificial warmth. Beside Leopold sat his sister, the Archduchess Maria Luisa. She also held a white satin programme, and her eyes glanced down at it continually. The Countess Carola was behind her with two other ladies. Leopold had asked Christian to join him in the Royal Box. The Generalissimo had refused; not,

as Leopold thought, from modesty, for General Crack did not know the meaning of that sentiment, but that there might be no confusion between their two receptions—the formal and chilly homage paid to Leopold must in no way be mingled with the excitement of the welcome given to the adored hero of the moment.

Christian with the Maréchal De Lisle and several other French and Austrian officers, was in a *loge* opposite to, but lower than that of the Emperor.

Count Hensdorff had not wished the Countess Carola to share these Imperial honours, but Leopold had wilfully insisted, as he had again begun to find a certain consolation in the languishing charms of this black-eyed lady. She at least whole-heartedly admired him—or pretended to do so. She gave no hint of being turned from her admiration of Leopold by the latest successes and obvious attractions of Christian; she was his palpable vassal, adoring, waiting; possibly she might make him forget the stings of his late misfortune.

Christian was already in his place when Leopold arrived, and every one was staring at the stupendous hero. Leopold glanced impatiently away from that gaudy show opposite, and gazed at the stage, at present covered by a gleaming saffron-coloured satin curtain, looped and ruffled with myriads of stars and suns formed of glass sequins.

The opera was that popular favourite, *Alexander in Egypt*, and Martinelli was to sing; he had come from Naples on purpose for this grandiose occasion. Leopold delighted in music, and was a considerable amateur musician himself, but he detested to hear it in public, and proposed to himself no pleasure from the official overwhelming magnificence of the spectacle promised.

He said to Hensdorff, who stood behind him:

“I shall be glad when it is over.”

And Hensdorff could not resist the ironic reply:

“It seems to me that Your Majesty will be glad when everything is over. You are always wishing for every matter to come to a conclusion.”

But he was startled by the tragic manner in which the young man whispered back:

"I shall indeed, Hensdorff, be glad when everything is over!"

The orchestra took their places, and there was tuning of violins and delicate instruments. Hensdorff suddenly remembered something that he had wished to say to Leopold all day. He leant low behind the pompous chair, and whispered:

"That fellow Gabor, Sire—do you still wish to see him?"

Leopold stared across the theatre at Christian, who was laughing with the French officers; in every gesture showing flaunting arrogance.

"Yes," said the Emperor, flatly, "I wish to see him. See that it is arranged, Hensdorff."

The Duchess Maria Luisa was also looking at Christian. She had indeed looked at nothing else except her programme since she had entered the theatre. Leopold noted her gaze, and said:

"I suppose to you he seems a very great hero indeed?"

And she replied, guardedly, from behind the plummy wave of her rosy fan:

"I suppose he has done very well, Sire."

"Very well, as you may perceive," smiled Leopold, waving his hand round the theatre. "All this is owing to him, and we are enjoying it vastly—are we not, Luisa? You heard, too, how the people were all acclaiming him as we came in. Even out of respect to us they hardly silenced themselves."

"But it has all been for you, Sire," replied Maria Luisa. "His victories have all been for you."

"And at a price," smiled Leopold; "at a price, my dear Luisa!"

The Archduchess thought curiously:

"That girl: he didn't want to give up that girl; I wonder what sort of creature she is. I should like to see her."

And aloud she asked: "Why does not Prince Christian send for his wife? Why should she not come here to join in his triumphs?"

"She is safe in Ottenheim," said Leopold, still with that fixed smile; "she is far too precious for him to parade before the crowd."

"Yet from what I hear," replied the Archduchess, slightly, "she is nothing; only a pretty child."

"Nothing," murmured Leopold; "nothing!"

The Archduchess asked: "Cannot we have Prince Christian here with us in the box? I have not yet spoken to him, and it would amuse me to do so."

"I am willing that he should come," replied Leopold, stiffly, "but both he and Hensdorff, who are our masters, you know, my dear Luisa, have arranged otherwise."

Maria Luisa looked at him timidly, alarmed by the ironic bitterness in his voice. She also felt uneasy, aware of a certain brittleness about all this glory, all this elaborate beauty which had the transparent and elusive quality of the rainbow, of the bubble, passing and deceptive radiance, through which the hand of reality might at any moment be rudely thrust, dispersing it to the careless heavens.

She knew instinctively that they might be applauded, but that they were not yet safe; but she was well trained to show none of her feelings, least of all her feelings of dismay. She remained erect and prim in her brocaded seat, and looked away from her brother so as not to give him the opportunity for any more disturbing and painful remarks.

The theatre became very hot. Mingled with perfume was the sickly sweetness from all the caskets of sweets and preserves that were being opened, the sweetness of dried violets and rose leaves, and of fine sugar. There was a globe of lapis lazuli above the proscenium, crowned with laurels and lilies, and supported by gay and redundant angels. Maria Luisa watched this sphere until it seemed to be swimming in the warm space; she did not care to any longer watch General Crack. There was a soft and incessant chattering, subdued by respect; there was a perpetual waving of fans, and a movement of headdresses adorned with feathers and knots of ribbons and jewels. Maria Luisa was very conscious of her own jewels, the famous and

flamboyant gems of the House of Austria. She and her brother both wore, by the express advice of Hensdorff, the black and silver of Hapsburg. Above the box, she knew, was the Imperial Eagle, spreading his sumptuous and pretentious plumage.

The candle-snuffers went about in decorously laced uniforms. The theatre became like a cabinet of sweets, of perfume, of preserved flowers. The atmosphere was fragrantly stifling.

The orchestra began to play the Overture, and the chattering conversation slackened a little.

Leopold was so fond of music that he became at once enamoured of the dancing melody, and leaned forward a little from his official seat, entranced to forgetfulness of the crowd by the new vision of heavenly kingdoms conjured up by the elaborate, fantastic and sophisticated melody. He seemed to be removed at once from his formal and slightly ridiculous position. He forgot Christian opposite, and joined the visionary company of Eleanora in the beechwoods on the Danube.

The curtain went up on an Eastern scene that sparkled with gems, and gold and silver threads entwined in velvets and satins, and in the aigrettes of sultans and sultanas.

Maria Luisa dared now to watch Christian. There was a circle of candles underneath his box, which threw a full light on his resplendent person. She could see him very clearly. She noticed how easily he conversed and laughed with the French generals: much more easily than he ever conversed or laughed with her brother. He was at home with these men, in whose company he had been educated, in a way he would never be at home with the Germans or Austrians: he was alien, she reflected, a foreigner.

He was speaking French as if that language gave him pleasure. Even through the music she could now and then catch his voice as he made some lively comment to his companion. He wore his Field-Marshal's uniform and all his orders. He was more radiantly bedizened than any gorgeous figure on the stage.

The music and the singing voices mounted, casting enchantments round the gilded elegance of the packed theatre. The applause was instant and enthusiastic. Every one was elated and excited. The Italian tenor, singing like a nightingale, had the power even to change the mood of Leopold, who was able to forget his vexation and his melancholia as he listened; he was even able to cast off his besetting sense of the futility and foolishness of it all, of the hollowness of this pompous show, of this arrogant parade of victory and conquest.

The pageant of the stage mingled with the pageant of the auditorium. All the colours, all the metallic hues of gold and silver, copper and bronze, seemed to float adrift and mingle one into the other, lambent, giddy, distracting.

Alexander on the stage, fully adorned for war, seemed but the reflexion of Christian in his mirrored box, bedecked in complete military parade. The scintillating glitter of the theatric gems was replied to by the sparkle of the jewels worn by the audience. The emeralds and the rubies in the turbans of the captive Indian princes and the defeated sultans sparkled no more brightly than the stars and crosses on the breasts of the generals and the Emperor.

All seemed one ostentatious ceremonial—profuse, voluptuous and arrogant, vanity on vanity, all to emphasize the enormous importance of the late victory and to impress by this flaunt of elation the already drooping spirits of the enemy.

As Alexander proceeded to his gorgeous triumph amid an elaborate fanfare of trumpets, to every one in the audience, and not least to Leopold, it was the triumph of Christian that was celebrated; and when La Giralda, the beautiful and notorious actress, robed with every extreme of symbolism and splendour as Victory, stepped down with a laurel crown glittering with diamonds in her white hand, it was not to the actor she turned, not to that buskined and artificial hero, but to Prince Christian seated in his box and leaning with his air of tolerant amusement towards the stage.

Amid the plaudits of the audience, it was to Christian she

offered the triumphal crown. She had made, it is true, a dutiful reverence towards the Imperial Box; but this was a mere formality. General Crack, and he alone, received her homage, as he received the homage of the audience, who now, half rising from their seats, interrupted the pageant of the play to take their part in this other pageant which, to them at least, was reality.

Christian received this ostentatious compliment with the correct gesture of good-humoured tolerance, and graceful indifference. He was indeed but little moved. He knew how to value such moments of frantic enthusiasm at their real worth. If he did not dislike the gaudy moment, at least he was neither bewildered nor impressed by it. He put aside the wreath with easy smiles and light words to the generals behind him.

The actress, with full exercise of all her indolent charms, continued to urge his acceptance; and the Maréchal De Lisle at last took the sparkling laurels and flung them on to Christian's arm. The applause was tremendous. Leopold saw his own sister lean forward over the edge of the box, and clap her two delicate hands together, flushing under her brilliant rouge. For himself, he did nothing, but remained mute, with his inevitable part of silent majesty.

He knew that Christian fully merited this triumph, which had been gained by sheer feats of arms and the overcoming of considerable difficulties. His endurance and his courage, his judgment and his prudence, had alike been hugely tried; and his flashing success was the measure of his qualities.

When the curtain went down on the first act, Maria Luisa suggested to her brother that Christian should be sent for; and this time, Leopold did not or could not demur. He spoke to Hensdorff, and Hensdorff spoke to an officer, and an officer to a page; and within a moment or two the victor of St. Omer was in the Imperial Box, towards which all eyes were now directed in a manner in which they had not been directed when it was occupied only by the Emperor and his sister.

Christian was, naturally, in a good humour with every

one; but he was still careful to conceal too much satisfaction or exultation; not only in adversity or in trial, but in success and splendour, his constant endeavour was to preserve that composure which he considered the symbol of strength; of breeding. It was his most passionate desire to conceal both his thoughts and his emotions from the comments of other men; how carefully there he had copied the French Princes, always so languorous and indifferent, how ardently he had taught himself to repress the violence and passion of his Southern taint, he alone knew. Maria Luisa stirred, and motioned to the chair beside her. She appeared different from the tired woman who had greeted him in the corridor of the palace at Berlin. Her high, curled, powdered hair was crowned by a circlet of white, waxy, scentless hothouse flowers. The bodice on which sparkled the immemorially old jewels of the House of Austria was of rich blue velvet; her train was lined with ermine. She was fine, elegant, highly bred, fragile. For a second Christian, kissing her finger tips, amused himself by the reflection that he might on this occasion have sat beside this woman as her husband—an Imperial Archduke.

He turned deferentially to Leopold, however, and Leopold rose with a certain impatience; their two glittering figures were reflected in the dusky, candle-lit mirrors, making four glitters, with, behind them, the vaguer figures of the Princess and the Countess Carola, who was a hushed vehemence, a controlled ardour in flaming blue.

To Leopold the scene was fast becoming merged in one sparkling giddiness. He held himself stiffly, and spoke mechanical sentences, appropriate and yet meaningless: for they were merely the result of long schooling in saying appropriate things.

When the coquettish curtain went up again, he drew back into the recesses of the box, abandoning the Imperial chair, to which none of the whispered inducements of Hensdorff could persuade him to return. The two women had gracefully detained Christian in the Imperial Box; very luxurious, very extravagant, strong and handsome, adorned by his

obvious and showy successes, he stood between them; and Leopold noted that they both flattered him—Maria Luisa, with her majestic timidity, the Countess Carola with her languishing yet fiery air of enticement and promise. Both of them had forgotten Leopold and Hensdorff and the other ladies behind; with word and gesture and look, they praised, flattered, and paid homage to General Crack. Nothing could have been more odious or ridiculous to the Emperor.

Immediately the performance was over, Leopold left the box and retired into the antechamber behind it, where wines and sweetmeats were served on tables of antique yellow marble covered with lace. He drew the curtains impulsively across the entrance to the box, but he could still hear the ovations coming from the theatre—the applause, once, twice and thrice renewed, given to Christian, the immense shouts of his name, of his praises—how easy to turn the heads of women and fools!

Leopold poured out wine from the first bottle to his hand—poured it out so violently that he spilled it across the marble table, and drank, and sat down heavily with his head in his hands. Hensdorff had followed him, and looked at him with a certain anxiety. He could understand that Leopold was torn with jealousy, and sympathized with the difficult position of the unhappy young man.

At last the ladies left the box, and came into the antechamber. Maria Luisa was elegantly leaning on the arm of Christian, and looking up into his face as if enraptured by the least change of his expression or the smallest word he deigned to speak; her small, frail person quivered with admiration.

Leopold groaned within his heart; he felt sick with their mutual humiliation.

“How can she?” he thought to himself; “how can she? With that man, and after what has happened!”

But if his sister’s behaviour gave him this poignant pang, he was even more sourly moved to see the admiration of the Countess Carola diverted from himself to this victorious hero of a theatric hour. That capricious beauty hardly

glanced at Leopold, though he was arrayed in all his Imperial splendour ; exercising all those arts which Leopold had once found so delicious, she competed with Maria Luisa for the graces of Christian, who appeared by no means indifferent. Leopold was unequal to this situation, as he had been unequal to every situation in which he had yet found himself. He rose heavily, and led the way from the theatre.

Christian shared his coach ; green leather, lavishly painted, elaborately adorned, swinging lightly on the leathers, drawn by eight red-apparelled white horses. In the dark streets, the gathered people shouted for Christian, as in the bright theatre those others had shouted. No voice was raised for the Emperor ; nor did the two women in the coach appear to notice this omission. They seemed to have made themselves one with the triumph of Christian, and to be elated at his elation. And that Christian was cool before all this giddy adulation only added to the deep vexation of Leopold, who thought :

“The higher the peak, the deeper the abyss—to make him fall as no man has fallen since Belisarius !”

TWENTY-EIGHT

THERE was a reception after the Opera, in the house of the Governor of the Spanish Netherlands, now, after so long, returned in triumph to his residence.

Leopold had to move about among his important guests, making himself agreeable, coining himself, as it were, into compliments, caressing smiles, and looks, to retain these influential people loyal to his cause.

All of them praised the victorious general to his face, and he had to endure that and agree with the galling laudations of the man whom he more and more detested. He had to endure the spectacle of the Archduchess and the Countess Carola Borgonie, both like nymphs attendant on the god Mars, forever by the side of General Crack, competing, as it seemed to Leopold in his bitterness, for his lightest favour.

Leopold found an opportunity to call Hensdorff nervously aside.

"Have you," he asked, in an eager whisper, "told Prince Christian what I begged you to tell him—given him, in brief, my warning?"

"Your warning?" asked Hensdorff, amazed; for in this hurried moment he could not recall what Leopold meant. Then, before that young man answered, he remembered the scene in the parlour of the grange the day after the great battle of St. Omer.

"Sire," he replied, sternly, "Prince Christian has given me neither excuse nor opportunity for such a warning."

"Look at him," Leopold replied, hastily, "now with my sister and the Countess Carola Borgonie; does he bear himself like a man who takes his honours modestly?"

Hensdorff glanced at the superb victor, but could see no such form of offence as Leopold discerned.

"He bears himself like any soldier in a moment of arrogant victory, he is young too," he replied. "Your Majesty does wrong to take so much heed of those who fight for you. Use them and let them go; that is the only philosophy."

"It is one to which I have not attained," said Leopold, dully.

Christian was leaning over the back of the Archduchess's chair. The Golden Fleece, burning and sparkling on his breast, touched her bare, white shoulder. On a stool before the Princess sat the Countess Carola, gleaming in cobalt satin, powdered with pearls—sparkling from her pomaded hair to the flashing diamonds on her tiny shoes; she was gazing up at Christian also, and her tinkling laugh adorned his speech.

It seemed to Leopold as if this man might have either of those women, both of whom were dear and something sacred to himself, by the mere putting out of his hand. "So easy! So easy!" he said, furiously, in his heart. "Even Luisa falls so easily, to the first flashy adventurer. What is he but a mercenary soldier who well knows his trade, who may be bought at any moment if the price be high enough?" And he reflected, sickening, the price that *he* had paid, and the price that he had offered: two women, one woman waiting for the victor in Ottenheim, the other woman sitting there looking as if she were ready to fall at his feet. Could not she also recall how she had been put forward and rejected?

Count Hensdorff still remained by the Emperor's side, watching the sparkling scene which was to him a certain seal upon his strenuous endeavours, a certain insignia of success—as definitely as the collar of The Golden Fleece was the insignia of Christian's success.

"Send me," said Leopold, abruptly, "that scoundrel Gabor. I have some work for him."

Hensdorff looked at him doubtfully. He did not greatly care for this frequent mention of Gabor on Leopold's lips. He associated it with his dislike for Christian, though he did not for one second associate it with Eleanora. It was

unlike Leopold to have secret dealings with any one, and Hensdorff was wise enough to beware of any unlikely trait in any one's character; especially such a character as that of Leopold. When he did anything which was not in accordance with his usual nature, it would probably be something dangerous.

"Gabor is in the palace now, I think, Sire," he replied, doubtfully; "but to what end would you see him? Whatever your purpose, you might find a more proper instrument."

But Leopold insisted.

"Send him to my chamber to-night, when I am alone at last. I suppose I *shall* be alone, somewhere towards the dawn. I must and will see that man, Hensdorff, and if you do not send him to me, I will find him for myself, no matter at what cost and scandal."

So it happened that Gabor had a private audience of the Emperor when the palace in Brussels was at length silent; when the city was sleeping at last, after the gala and tumults of rejoicing, the Te Deum, the fireworks, the music and the pageantry of triumphs.

Leopold had not been able to command his temper with his sister; he had spoken to her sharply, almost cruelly, about her manner to Christian, reminding her bitterly both of what the man really was, and their one-time relationship towards him. To his distressed amazement, she had taken this reproof with a very passion of tears and reproaches, turning on him so violently that he had been startled; incoherently defending herself and defending Christian, like one whose nerves had stretched to an unbearable tension; and then had swept from him with darkling looks of scorn, and left him dismayed and overwhelmed.

To the Countess Carola he disdained to speak; but that evening he had heard many a light whisper which consigned that capricious lady to Christian. "A conquest!" one had said: "not quite so difficult but more pleasant than that of Tournay or Mons."

Another had remarked that the lady had endured an even briefer siege than the city of Brussels.

Leopold, waiting in the anteroom to his bedchamber, had dismissed his valets, having taken off all the gauds which seemed to him so many taunts to his inefficiency. Wrapped in his dressing-gown, and with the lights of but one cluster of candles, he waited for Gabor. The fire had burnt low on the hearth and the room was chill, but Leopold had set the windows wide over the sleeping city.

The Transylvanian entered, lightly and delicately. He had long been expecting this summons. Patiently he had gone away, exactly he had done his work, knowing that, sooner or later, Leopold would send for him. He had been one of the obscurer members of the audience at the opera that night. From the back of the brilliant theatre he had watched the two men—Leopold, set up like an image in his high chair, hung with brilliants and his orders, Christian flourishing in his own box among the French marshals in their blue and silver.

Ferdinand Gabor, with his cold and subtle wit, had been able to read the minds of the two men. He could have told the very point at which Leopold had noticed his sister looking at Christian; the very moment when he had found the proximity of Christian and those two women unbearable, and so had withdrawn into the warm shadows of the gorgeous box. He could read, too, the amused indifference of Christian which further inflamed the Emperor, and the excited admiration of the two women, stirred by the superb bravery of the man's appearance, by the obvious glory and splendour of his triumph, by the heady music and the flamboyancy of the rich occasion. Gabor, smiling to himself in his back seat, could read all this, and in it all copious material for his plans.

Walking daintily across the soft carpet, he stopped before Leopold, who had not looked up at his approach, but sat there, sullen, with downcast head before that wide-flung window which opened on the winter darkness.

"Sire," said Gabor, at length, "there is a draught, and the candles will gutter."

Leopold was startled at his insolence in speaking before he was addressed, but he knew that already he could not resent any insolence from Gabor. He watched the candles, where the wax was floating down in a winding sheet onto the silver sticks.

"Have you heard any more from Ottenheim?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Only," said Gabor, delicately, "only, Sire, that the girl mopes and pines."

Leopold put his cold hand to his chilled forehead.

"How do you know she mopes and pines?" he whispered.

"I have my agents in Ottenheim as in other places, Sire," replied the Transylvanian. "I was many years in Prince Christian's service, and still am in communication with those who serve him now."

This was true enough, and Gabor had much information as to the petty details of that lonely household in the Château on the Danube.

"The winter comes on," he continued, in a low voice; "all those brilliant birds that Christian paid so much for are dead, or dying; and the antelopes and gazelles also shiver and die. There are no longer any flowers on the ground, any leaves on the trees; and the waters, instead of being blue or green, are now grey. There are clouds, both over the sun by day and over the moon by night; and the stars seldom show. Those big rooms seem very empty to the Princess Eleanora; she is far from every one she knew, save that old woman—who is, after all, Christian's watchdog, Christian's spy."

"Is she?" said Leopold, hotly. He had not thought of this. "Has he won over that old harridan, then?"

"He has," said Gabor. "She sends him her reports, like a guardian reporting on a prisoner. Eleanora does this, or does that; Eleanora thinks of this, or thinks of that: it is all taken down and sent to her lord and master, who, in his turn, is never so occupied, Sire, in your affairs, that he can-

not send back his minute instructions as to his wife—or captive, as you may choose to take her.”

“Ay,” said Leopold, moodily, “I might have thought of that—he’d have her watched, he would not leave her unguarded. . . .”

“And there is the garrison, too, and Colonel Pons: when she rides abroad, Colonel Pons must be her escort; when she stirs, the garrison must note her going. Do you think that she can long endure this, and not droop, Sire?”

Leopold did not speak.

“And not think,” added Gabor, deliberately, “of the man who might rescue her?”

“O God!” cried Leopold, passionately. “What shall I do?”

From the pocket of his decent black suit, Gabor pulled out a fine handkerchief, and stretched it, dragging it exactly corner to corner. As he did this, he remarked, in an abstracted manner:

“Prince Christian is taking great pains, Sire, that the campaign shall soon be over; and when it *is* over, he will go back to Ottenheim, and it will be too late.”

To such a man as Leopold, the words “too late” are the bitterest in the world, for he knows full well how often they must be said about him and his actions.

“Is it true,” he asked, huskily, “that she is not well? That she sickens there in her loneliness?”

“In her waiting—in her expectations?” smiled Gabor, with a slight shrug. “What more can I tell Your Majesty? She wrote to you, and did not, I think, get an answer.”

“It was impossible,” cried Leopold, agonized, “for me to send an answer; almost impossible for me to know how to pen an answer!”

And then he caught himself up, feeling how desperately he was committing himself before this mean man, this spy, this scoundrel, this backstairs go-between. And yet he had no other possible help, no other possible ally.

“It may be,” said Gabor, in his most insinuating voice, flickering his ashy eyes, “that when her husband returns

the lady will recover. He does not seem to find it so difficult to capture ladies' hearts."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Leopold. "What have *you* seen?"

"I was present at the Opera to-night," smiled Gabor, "and I observed—as no doubt Your Majesty observed—how easily and lightly ladies will lose their hearts to a hero of the moment. Prince Christian has a showy presence, and those arrogant manners which impress female hearts. I think there were two or three there to-night to whom he would not have to sue long in vain."

"Of course," thought Leopold, furiously, "it was clear to all: even Maria Luisa—even my sister! That scene she made to-night; that uncontrollable passion of agitation: what did that mean, save that the man had disturbed her heart?"

And had he not heard them talking slightly of the Countess Carola: the woman who had been Leopold's Egeria, the woman whom he had regarded with such a fastidious and such a fantastic adoration, the object of his high and platonic affection, too high to be his lover. Was this woman whom Leopold had deemed too fine for vulgar love to be the momentary mistress of a man like Christian? Was even this humiliation in store for him? To lose his promised wife, and, as it were, his promised mistress too—and to the same careless, superb insolence of a mountebank upstart, a base-born hired soldier?

And Gabor was watching him, with contempt, no doubt; it had come to this, that he must sit there while a man like Gabor watched him, and spied upon his agitation—his despair.

"If Your Majesty," suggested the Transylvanian, "were to write a letter, I think that I could see that it was conveyed to Ottenheim."

"I'll write no letter!" cried Leopold, wildly. "I have nothing more to say. You may, Sir, begone, and endeavour, for your own good, to forget all this affair."

"Forget or remember," smiled Gabor, deferentially, "I

would beg Your Majesty to note there is no advantage to me, either way."

Leopold rose and violently closed the windows, for the candles were indeed guttering into ragged, fierce flame, and a great sheet of wax had dripped past the sticks onto the buhl table. He paced up and down the room, still pressing his cold hand to his forehead.

"You will write no letter, then, Sire?" insinuated Gabor. "To me the matter is nothing; only I have some pity for the lady, who seems to me to have been somewhat abused in the interests of politics."

"Curse these infernal politics," flung out Leopold. "Curse these diabolical wars! It is all a nightmare!"

"But one from which Your Majesty, if you are not wary, will never wake," said Gabor, "or only wake to death," he added quickly, under his breath.

Leopold stayed his paces by the sinking embers of the wide hearth, and stared down into the dying glow with vacant gaze. Gabor softly approached him.

"There is, Sire," he said, "yet one other alternative: if you will not write, you might yourself go to Ottenheim."

Leopold looked at him, as if fascinated, across his shoulder.

"Go myself to Ottenheim?" he repeated. "You talk moonshine, madness!"

Gabor gave his jerking shrug.

"Christian," he remarked, "is occupied with the war; Your Majesty might gain a few days' absence from headquarters. Surely you are not yet such a—"

"Such a slave to this man, you would say?" added Leopold, bitterly. "Say what you like, for I cannot take offence from *you*, Ferdinand Gabor: I am come so low as that! But never dream," he added, "that I shall go to Ottenheim. Do not even think of such a thing; do not even let such words pass your lips again."

Gabor bowed ironically.

"Then I have nothing more to say, Sire," he remarked,

"and I fear, Sire, that I can be of no use to Your Majesty. As for my news which you ask— it merely comes to this: again I tell you that the girl mopes and pines, and maybe, so the doctors say, before the spring she'll die. These little creatures, Sire, have a very light hold on life; and often, in losing their happiness, they lose their all."

Leopold bowed his head upon the marble mantelpiece, but did not answer. One by one, the lingering coals dropped into blackness on the hearth, and the harsh cold filled the large, pompous room.

"Go," said Leopold, without turning.

And Gabor bowed ironically to the back of his bent figure, then turned towards the door.

"I wish Your Majesty good luck!" he said; and left with no more than that, and yet did not leave without a deep impressiveness.

Leopold shivered, drew his quilted gown closer round him and glanced fearfully around the room. The silence was oppressive; both the inner silence of the palace and the outer silence of the city. It seemed the more oppressive from the contrast with the late shouts and acclamations, the sound of fireworks and of music—all the riotous tumult of the triumphal gala. He went into his empty bedchamber and raised the curtains of his bed, glancing hastily within almost as if he expected to see some one lurking there; then he put out the bracket of lights upon the centre table, and in the dark paced up and down.

After a while he went to his oratory, where two red lamps burned above the rich, carved shrine; and there he knelt for hours, with his brow against the cold stone and his thoughts bitter within his mind.

Here was no support—no comfort; he could not pray, nor open his heart to any invisible powers. When he at last left the oratory, cramped and cold and shivering, he was no nearer any resolution or any consolation.

Returning to his large and comfortless chamber, he wearied through till the dawn, trying to read, trying to think, lighting candles, quenching them; pacing up and down;

sitting down, exhausted; resting his head on the pillows of his bed and on the pillows of his chair; gazing with horror at the dead ashes on the hearth, and the long sheet of wax, now hard and chill, a frozen pendant from those first guttering candles of his interview with Gabor.

At length, his circling and distracted thoughts came round to the Countess Carola. In her he had at one time much delicate comfort; he could not believe her now wholly disloyal. Leopold endeavoured to keep his agitated emotions centred on the Countess Carola: on her tenderness, kindness and sympathetic understanding, in which so far she had never failed him. He blamed himself for accusing her too lightly of fickleness last night. It was but natural that she would be for the moment dazzled by the *éclat* that surrounded Christian; but Leopold could not bring himself to believe that this dazzle would last long. He had been too harsh with her in his thoughts, as he had been too harsh to his sister in his behaviour. Neither of these women must be blamed if they had been led away by the momentary excitement—the lights, the music and tumult, the praises: all the excitement of the triumphal gala. Her attention to Christian yesterday would not mean that she was any the less his friend now. He recalled, with some remorse and some pleasure, his long interviews with her in the Hofburg, in her room papered with a Japanese rice paper, on which were depicted various gallant birds, bearing plumes with a martial air high above their sharp, fantastic heads. There she had played and sang to him, and with her melodious voice and delicate fingers banished many a dream of melancholia and tedium, restoring his serenity with insinuant flatteries and respectful sympathy. He would, he decided, endeavour to renew this one-time intimacy, which did no harm to any one, and had in it at once something both noble and pure. Once more to be enthralled by the Countess Carola Borgonie would be to forget—or nearly to forget—Eleanora; to recover his present dignity, and possibly his peace of mind.

Leopold, at once impetuous and capricious, decided that to reëstablish his delicate relations with the Countess Carola

before he left Brussels would be to recover much of the poise which he had lost, to restore himself to some measure of equanimity, both in his own eyes and those of others; and if she was yielding, prepared to lean from her pedestal of ineffable virtue . . . a mistress must be at least a distraction.

Impulsively, and before he had either slept or dressed, he snatched aside the heavy curtains from the dawn, which was turning the sky the colour of nacre, above the city. He then searched nervously for a pen and paper, and finally found it in one of the ormolu desks in the anteroom. There he sat down, in the uncertain light, and began to write: "My dear Carola." Although he had a sense of awkwardness in penning this epistle, his mind ran fluently, and he composed, easily enough, the few sentences which invited the Countess Carola to a return of their former friendship—which had been, he well knew, recently rather neglected by both of them. . . .

He had already, in his mind, put her in the place of his good, or even his guardian, angel, and as such he addressed her, in courtly and extravagant terms of homage and respect, striving, as he wrote, to efface from his mind the memory of her adoring face turned yesterday towards Christian in the lustre of the ballroom; one must forget the vulgar display of last night when every one had lost their heads.

After all, he reflected, as he stamped the Imperial seal on the soft wax on the envelope, she could do no less than be civil to Christian: she may even have thought in doing so she was pleasing himself. "The man is, confound him, in my service, and fighting for me." And his reflections continued to the point when he realized that the Countess Carola could not possibly have known there was any bitterness between him and Christian, or any possible cause of dispute. In brief, she was utterly ignorant of the episode of the Princess Eleanora. And Leopold, without too much difficulty, could persuade himself that all her caressing glances and pleasant words and agreeable manners last night,

directed towards the conqueror, had merely been to please himself, whom all the conquests were intended to benefit.

As the day strengthened into his empty room, he made an effort to shake off all the dark and sinister impressions of yesterday—those ugly moments in the Opera and in the reception room, when he had been eclipsed, nay, more than eclipsed (as it seemed to his sensitiveness), blasted, by the triumphs of Christian, by the sumptuous self-assurance with which Christian received that same triumph.

The Countess Carola lodged in one of the houses on the other side of the Grande Place. Her husband remained in Vienna, but she had in her company a bevy of graceful ladies and many servants.

Gazing at this house across the chill, blank square, which seemed desolate indeed after the tumultuous gaieties of last night, he saw a light already in one of the upper windows. The Countess Carola was probably, like himself, awake and watching; possibly even thinking of him, as he was thinking of her; he rang the bell, and when the sleepy valet came gave him the note, and bade him take it at once to the Countess Carola, with the message that he would come in an hour or so to breakfast with that lady, as he had often done in the old, familiar days in the Hofburg. Maria Luisa might come too, but presently she would go away, and he would be alone with his goddess, and free to tell her, if not the heart of his troubles, at least the outward distresses of them, to receive from her that comfort and consolation, that sympathy and respect, which he had never failed to find a grateful cloak over his weaknesses and deficiencies.

Always the Countess Carola had succeeded in exalting him in his own eyes, and that was what he now wished more than anything—to be raised in his own eyes . . . after last night.

He watched the valet with the note cross the square, and then he hastily dressed himself, to escape the tedium of the attendance of his gentlemen and servants—a ceremony that he always detested. He felt relieved, almost elated, as if a terrible temptation had been offered, and then, on his gesture

of repulsion, on his cry of resistance, had passed. In this softened mood he thought with regret of his harshness to his sister; presently he would ask her pardon, perhaps while he was escorting her across the cold square to the Countess Carola; tell her how sorry he was for last night, and how wrong he had been; that the strain and the excitement of the evening had made him both rough and unjust. Surely she would forgive him, as she had so often forgiven him faults before—never, poor child, had she lacked in tenderness.

The sounds of movements in the palace began. Leopold shrank nervously into himself on hearing these footsteps; he did not wish to meet any one—not any one but the Countess Carola; till she had soothed him, he was in no mood to face the world.

The valet returned; he had been on duty all night, dozing in the adjoining closet. He looked tired, and hardly able to repress yawns. With a deep obeisance he returned to Leopold the note that he had just given him.

"I did not, Sire, leave it with the Countess," he said, sly beneath his servility.

"And why?" demanded Leopold, startled.

"Because, Sire, she was not alone," replied the valet, who was a man of tact and experience, "and I did not think it would be your wish that this note should be sent up to her while she was with company. If I have done wrong I can, Sire, immediately return with it."

"Who is with her?" demanded Leopold, on a quick breath.

"Prince Christian breakfasts with her," replied the valet; and in his dim vicious eyes, Leopold read the rest of the sentence, "after spending the night in her apartment."

T W E N T Y - N I N E

C H R I S T I A N'S design was to leave the Southern Netherlands fortified by their rightful masters, the Spanish, and return himself with the Imperial troops to Frankfurt and there crown the Emperor, whose hereditary dominions of Bavaria and the Palatinate would be, he hoped, in a short while completely cleared of the enemy. He relied above everything on the exactitude and promptitude of his movements and therefore was greatly pressed with business; for there was much to be done, and not so many on whom he could rely for effective coöperation.

It was therefore well in the afternoon of the day that he had breakfasted with the Countess Carola before Hensdorff could see him.

He lodged in the ancient mansion of the Princes of Orange, in the Grande Place, not far from the two palaces—the one occupied by the Countess Carola and that occupied by Leopold.

When Hensdorff was at last admitted into his presence, he was already making final preparations to leave Brussels.

The minister said at once, and in a tone of forced indifference:

“The Emperor left this morning early.”

“Left Brussels?” asked Christian, frowning. “Do you mean that he has gone?”

“Yes, I mean that!” replied Hensdorff, looking away.

“Where?” asked Christian.

“He went with the Elector of Saxony to Dresden, and afterwards, I believe, he intends to go to Berlin. You know that he is always averse to winter campaigning, and he believes,” Hensdorff continued, speaking deliberately, “he believes that, after the late successes, the troops should have some repose and go into winter quarters.”

Christian smiled.

"Does he think that *he* needs repose after *his* exertions?" he asked. "Really, my dear Count, it looks to me as if the man is a fool! I cannot understand why you, who appear to be perfectly sensible, could have taken so much trouble to serve him!"

Hensdorff did not reply to this. Looking sideways at Christian and biting his forefinger, he repeated:

"Well, he has gone; and I dare say Your Highness will not greatly miss him! He himself seemed to think that his absence will be a matter of little moment; he has left me a laconic note."

"And for me nothing?" asked Christian.

"For you, Sir, nothing," said Hensdorff. He drew a scrap of paper out of his pocket, and showed it to the other. On it was just scrawled: "My dear Count, I do not believe that I shall be missed in Brussels. I am therefore accompanying the Elector of Saxony to Dresden, where you may send for me when you will."

Christian glanced at the scrawl. He had known that the Elector of Saxony intended to return to Dresden for the winter, and had little regretted it, for the Elector was a man of mediocre intelligence and considerably disaffected, not in the least inclined to sacrifice his leisure and even his comfort to enhance the glory of another man.

"I did not know," remarked Christian, "that the Elector was a friend of Leopold. This arrangement must have been very sudden."

"Well," said Hensdorff, nervously, "I imagine that Your Highness will not greatly miss the Emperor—that you will be able to carry out your arrangements without his presence."

"Certainly," said Christian, with his serene smile, "His Majesty is of little use. At the same time, it is quite impossible for him to leave the army like this. You, my dear Hensdorff, must go at once to Dresden and tell him to return. It is quite impossible for any one to go into winter quarters this campaign; and the troops will be much affected by the Emperor's departure, and the manner of it. Why,"

he added, turning the matter over in his mind, "he must have gone almost secretly; it's like a flight!"

"Doubtless," replied Hensdorff, "he acted upon a sudden mood. He does that, you know; he likes also to assert his authority."

"Authority!" smiled Christian. "It seems to me that he has none! No one regards him at all. At the same time, he is the Emperor, and he must return. The husband of the Queen of Hungary is in command of her troops, and the King of England's son is in command of the Hanoverians; and it is not possible that the Imperialists should be left to me, whom, I have no doubt," he added, superbly, "they call a hired mercenary."

"If he does not return in a day or so I will go and fetch him back," said Hensdorff, but without much confidence. "Meanwhile, what gloss and fair bearing can I put on the matter, so that the Emperor's reputation is upheld?"

Christian reflected. He was more amused than vexed by Leopold's capricious action. After all, a short absence from the army might easily be condoned in the Emperor, and Christian did not doubt that any one as facile as Leopold could soon be induced to return to his post. But he agreed with Hensdorff that it would be as well to put the best possible face upon the matter.

"Do you know why he has gone?" he asked. "Is there some real motive, some reason at the bottom of it?" And he added, indifferently, "A woman, perhaps?"

Hensdorff turned aside his tired eyes, lest they should glance too sharply at the speaker.

"With Leopold it is seldom a woman," he said, carelessly. "No; I think it is nothing but fatigue and boredom. Leopold is one who is overwhelmed by the tedium of life."

"He is oddly disinterested in his own fortunes," replied Christian. "There are few men who would be quite so indifferent at the prospect of an Imperial Diadem!"

"He has enough sense," remarked Hensdorff, "to see how unfitted he is for any such position."

"Well," smiled Christian, "these subtleties are no matter

of mine. I have engaged to set him on this same despised throne, and I must do so, even despite himself, it seems. You must hasten after him, my dear Count, and induce him to return before he reaches Dresden. He does not even know my plans—which, as I say, are to advance at once on Frankfurt, before the enemy realizes what we are about to do. No doubt they consider that the campaign is now over, and that I shall remain for the winter in Brussels. It is necessary to take them completely by surprise, and be over the Rhine again before they are aware of our movements; otherwise we may have to fight again, and more fiercely than at St. Omer, before we reach our destination. Tell the Emperor this, and that I expect him to meet me at my concentration camp at Ems.”

Long accustomed to full command over every one to whom he spoke, Christian gave out these short sentences with an air of decisive authority; at the same time he smiled agreeably at Hensdorff, whom he had begun rather to admire; and, as Hensdorff had often thought that he would like him for a master, so Christian had often reflected that Hensdorff would make a very capable servant for a man like himself. He would very much have liked to be an emperor, with Hensdorff for his minister. “He and I together,” he had often thought, “could rule the empire very well indeed.” And he remarked now, as he rose, pulling his sash-knot into place with his mechanical habit of neatness and precision:

“It is really a pity, my dear Count, that you have not a little better material to work with.”

Hensdorff’s reply to this remark was unexpected and singular.

“I hope,” he said, earnestly, “the behaviour of the Emperor will not in any way affect the intention of Your Highness.”

“How should it affect me?” asked Christian, in surprise. “I knew what manner of man he was when I made the bargain with you, Count Hensdorff.”

“Did you?” asked Hensdorff, quietly. “Did you? That

was what I was wondering, Monseigneur!" He looked, as he spoke, so uneasy and distressed that Christian asked, sharply:

"Surely you do not think that I shall go back upon my word?"

"It cannot be," replied Hensdorff, evasively, "easy for a man like you, Monseigneur, to serve a man like Leopold."

"It is perfectly easy," replied Christian, serenely; "I do what I do for my price, my dear Count. The Emperor is a mere detail in my design. Once I have redeemed my word, fulfilled my promise, he may crash to his inevitable ruin as quickly as he pleases. It is, of course, understood," he added, "that until this is accomplished, he does not hinder or thwart me. Therefore I must ask you at once to go after him and bid him come to Ems—unless you have some one completely in your confidence to whom you can trust this mission. It were best, I think, to go yourself."

"I think it were," muttered Hensdorff, apprehensively, "and if you can concoct some excuse to blot over my absence—"

"I will say," smiled Christian, "that you have gone to buy over the Elector of Saxony, who sets his price up every half hour, and is not worth the lowest sum he has ever asked." Then he added, on a sudden recollection: "What is to become of the Archduchess? He has left her, it seems, on my hands: what are we to do with her, and the other ladies?"

Hensdorff shrugged.

"It is a pity," remarked Christian, calmly, "that he brings this galaxy of women behind him. They are nothing but a hindrance and an encumbrance; they had better remain in Brussels, which I should think they would find as dull as Vienna!"

"Yes, they had better remain in Brussels," agreed Hensdorff.

With a faint curiosity, Christian asked:

"Did you not say that the Countess Carola had some influence over the Emperor? Well, he has left her too. I

breakfasted with her this morning, upon her most importunate invitation, and the woman seems to me a fool; but an artful fool, who would have no difficulty in entangling a man like Leopold."

"If she ever did," said Hensdorff, "he is free of her now."

"She appears to regret him," remarked Christian, drily, "as little as she regrets her husband."

"She is," agreed Hensdorff, absently, "a stupid *bas bleu*."

He was not thinking of the Countess Carola Borgonie.

As he heavily and gloomily left the mansion of the Princes of Orange, he found Gabor on the steps, waiting for him; and the Transylvanian, with a low salute, at once fell into step behind him, as he walked round the Grande Place.

"Do you know anything about this departure of the Emperor?" asked Hensdorff in a low voice of his spy.

And Gabor answered immediately:

"I know nothing; but I can guess a great deal!"

"Has he gone to Dresden?" whispered Hensdorff, apprehensively; and, with a sneer, Gabor replied:

"No! Of course he has not gone, either to Dresden or to Berlin. I have kept a watch upon his movements," continued Gabor, "as you directed me. He was closeted with the Elector of Saxony for about half an hour this morning; they left the city together, but they did not long keep company. Leopold was without his uniform, and in a plain attire that amounted to a disguise. He appeared alike careless of his reputation and the consequences of his action."

Count Hensdorff came to a pause on the cobbled pavement.

"But where has he gone?" he whispered, desperately. "Where the devil has the man gone to?"

"You do well to mention the devil," replied Gabor, smiling with pale lips, "for his hand is certainly in this! Leopold has gone, I dare swear, to Bosenberg."

"God in heaven!" exclaimed Hensdorff.

Gabor laughed under his breath.

"Bosenberg is very near Ottenheim," he muttered, "and the Princess Eleanora seems a magnet to some men."

"I must after the accursed fool at once!" exclaimed Hensdorff, vigorously. "But he has nearly a day's start. Somehow I thought of this myself—and yet dared not! I might have known—"

But Gabor had not intended that he should know, until the Emperor had got that same good start of many hours' riding.

"Leave me now," muttered Hensdorff, desperate, yet thinking of the passers-by, for both townsmen and soldiers were passing through the Grande Place; "and if you breathe a single syllable of your suspicions, Gabor—" he paused, with a look of the utmost menace, and Gabor, for once in his life, spoke the utter truth when he replied:

"I can promise you that I will speak them to no one."

They parted at one of the corners of the Grande Place, whence Hensdorff hastened away to his lodgings to make preparations to follow Leopold. He was not quite sure whether he could believe the spy or not, and before he took any action he intended to make cautious and deliberate enquiries. These enquiries caused a certain, and not inconsiderable, delay. Gabor was hampered by no such troubles. After standing for a moment gazing up indifferently at the up-soaring spire of the ornate Town Hall, he, glancing over his shoulder to see that Hensdorff was really out of sight, turned and went swiftly to a little inn by one of the gates of Brussels, where he had lain not only before but since the surrender of the town.

After looking carefully to his pistol, his money and his horse, the three things of importance in his mind and important in just that order, the Transylvanian mounted, and rode away across the plain of Brabant, in the direction of Germany.

The prospect was melancholy; straight avenues of bare poplars stretched towards the flat horizon; the sky was a uniform grey, dappled like the breast of a goose and with a

hard appearance like iron. But the Transylvanian whistled pleasantly to himself as if he were on an agreeable mission, and by no means affected by the dreariness of the scene and the dulness of the prospect. He thought of last night at the Opera, of how he had sat, obscure, ignored, in the back of the theatre, and seen those two men set up like two bedecked images for the adoration of the mob; and it was very satisfactory to Gabor to reflect that he had such power over both of them—that he could pull those two adored idols down, drag off their shining ornaments and trample them in the mud.

These were the thoughts that he turned over in his keen mind with relish. Both those men had rejected him and insulted him; and on both of them he would have the most complete and delicate of revenges.

That foolish girl, too—she should not be spared. And Gabor licked his lips as he rode across the blank plain. He had fostered a gross passion for Eleanora: he was never fastidious in his desires. That would be the best of all—to enjoy her some day when she was sunk so low that any one might pick her up from the mire into which she had fallen. Yes; he foresaw such a fate for the Princess Eleanora that it might not be so very long before she was glad of the protection even of a man like himself. “Leopold,” he thought to himself, “is not the man to be faithful; and if he were, how long will his destiny hold?”

Absorbed in evil reflections, the Transylvanian rode deliberately towards his destination. He had estimated very exactly all the stages of his journey, and the time necessary to accomplish it. There was no hurry on his vile expedition; he did not wish to arrive too soon, and could scarcely—and he smiled to himself—arrive too late. . . .

At every post he made enquiries, and the answer always confirmed his suspicions. Leopold was travelling before him on the same road, in a plain equipage, but with no disguise of his quality. He had but a small escort, and was travelling rapidly, fresh horses at every stage.

Gabor often stopped at the same inn, and even sometimes

slept in the same bed. He was, like all spies, well supplied with money. He had his passport and all his papers in order, and could pass without molestation; he grinned in relish as he noted how well Christian had kept the lines of communication open behind him—and for what purpose?

And so, always on the heels of Leopold, he came through Würtemberg and Bavaria into Austria and onto the banks of the familiar Danube.

He had now proved himself correct in his surmises. Leopold had not ridden either to Berlin or to Dresden, but directly towards the Danube, on the banks of which stood his château of Bosenberg.

As he tracked Leopold so closely, he found that in Bavaria, his own country, and in Austria, the heart of the Empire, he was travelling in disguise, calling himself by a strange name—that of Count Amburg. He had dismissed his retinue and his escort, and left his coach behind. He now at last rode solitary, a single horseman like Gabor himself. “A fool of fools!” smiled Gabor; and the words were like a song upon his lips.

As Gabor reached the banks of the Danube, the first snow began to fall. Despite his flying haste, many days had passed since he had left Brussels, and he wondered maliciously how Prince Christian was enduring the long absence of the Emperor, and what was the fate of war . . . by now there might have been another battle. Gabor was travelling away from the seat of news, and had now outridden even rumour. The weather became colder; all colour, lustre and burnish had left the imposing scene of river and crag and wood, since last Gabor had looked upon it; winter, with chill weight, had obscured all the glowing luxuries of summer. The very waters of the wide stream seemed to move more sluggishly, and were blackish in hue. The fields, that had been so brilliant with harvest, were now dry and barren; the peasants all gathered into their huts and hovels, save those few who were miserably abroad, searching for sticks, and the remnants of grass and herbage.

Here the world seemed void and silent: it was difficult to

imagine that war was not so many leagues away, difficult to think that it had not been so many days ago that he, Gabor, had sat in the Opera House in Brussels and watched all the theatrical pageantry of triumph and ostentation. The wide, desolate winter landscape expressed a mournful emptiness; the very sky seemed sombre, and without hope. For the last two days, Gabor had lost track of Leopold, as a hound might lose track of the prey he is keenly scenting. The Emperor must have taken a different road. That which Gabor followed—the quickest and most commodious—knew no trace of the other swift horseman. The inns had heard nothing of any other traveller. But it never occurred to Gabor that perhaps Leopold had turned aside, or turned back. Too well he knew his man; too well the potency of the magnet that drew him onwards to his fate.

Therefore, without haste or hesitation, Gabor pursued his undeviating course. At length he left the sullen length of the river, and rode to the Emperor's estate of Bosenberg, that stately and luxurious pleasure-house, which Christian had had the insolence to copy in his Château of Ottenheim.

This palace had been built by the Emperor's father, to demonstrate the utmost degree of Imperial splendour and gorgeous majesty; but the pompous pleasure-grounds were now neglected, as were all such elegances during this long time of unceasing war.

The place, mansion and park, had been planned on too vast a scale. The place was overweighted by its own richness, like a too full-blown flower. Gabor rode through broken splendours and disregarded magnificences to the grand ostentation of the overadorned façade.

It was not often that Gabor went boldly to the front door of any house; but this time he did so, and faced with a sneer the immense and gloomy palace. The vast pile appeared closed, but there were some servants in livery here.

These answered Gabor's summons, and seemed to do so with alarm and agitation.

"The Emperor is here," said Gabor, in a tone of assur-

ance, standing, a black figure, against the grey landscape, on the wide, cold marble step.

And the lackey, not knowing who he might be, and impressed by his keen air of authority, admitted that the Emperor had arrived last night.

"Last night," repeated Gabor; "and may I see His Majesty? It is on business the most pressing." And with a malicious, though unnecessary, flourish, he added: "From Prince Christian—from the headquarters of the Imperial Army."

The lackey could well believe as much; to him, as to his fellow servants, left there in solitary charge of the abandoned pleasure-palace, the sudden appearance of the Emperor had been to the last degree strange and alarming. They had thought of vast defeats, of immense battles lost, to see the Emperor here in the middle of the campaign . . . it was as dreadful as it was incredible. Now, staring at this pale, thin man, looking at him with such keen contempt, the valet felt that some disaster had fallen his master, and he stammered out: "His Majesty is not here."

"No?" queried Gabor, softly, under his breath. "No?"

And the valet replied, stupidly: "His Majesty has just gone to Ottenheim."

Gabor played with the moment, as one might play with a jewel, slipping in and out of one's palm. He felt no chill in the air—no melancholy in the sky—no gloom in the huge closed palace.

"And who," he asked, delicately, "is at Ottenheim? That is Prince Christian's Château, and he is at the war."

The valet did not answer; he gazed stupidly at Gabor.

"Will you, Monseigneur, come in and await His Majesty's return?" he asked, being but a raw servant, and uninstructed in important duties.

"I will come in," replied Gabor, pleasantly, "and wait, and rest awhile; and then, I think that I, too, will ride to Ottenheim." And, as he entered the grey shadows of the long, marble corridor, he asked again: "Who is now at Ottenheim?"

"There are the two Princesses and their ladies," said the startled valet. "I know no more than that, Monseigneur!"

"And I think," said Gabor, taking off his cloak, "there is no more that any one need know, eh?"

He refreshed himself with Leopold's wine, Leopold's coffee, lounging upon Leopold's yellow brocade sofa. It gave him pleasure to do this. It was like an artist's final touch to his masterpiece: unnecessary, but delightful. He warmed himself by Leopold's fire, hastily lit in one of the large apartments, and he stared critically and insolently at the rows of Imperial portraits, that gazed with hauteur from the gloomy, high walls covered with watered silk and adorned by gilt panels. It amused him to gaze at all those long, pale faces of the Houses of Bavaria and Austria, of Hapsburg and of Spain, of Bourbon, Stewart and Valois—all of whom seemed to be gazing down at him with contempt, but also with alarm, as if they knew what he intended for their unfortunate descendant.

How sumptuous they were with their curled peruques and their gleaming orders and their great collars of jewels, their ermine robes and their falls of rich lace, and their grand, useless swords and their pompous, useless thrones, in their heavy armour and their polished helmets, so rigidly adorned with panaches of bright feathers! Gabor smiled from one to another, and to some he even gave a mocking bow, as he sipped his coffee before the brightening fire.

Plenty of time—ah! yes, plenty of time to drink his coffee and warm his hands and gaze mockingly at these Imperial portraits! Plenty of time to divert himself in Leopold's house; Leopold would not return yet.

The immense palace was empty; save for these poor fools of bewildered valets, there was no one to question Gabor or to spy on him. They all took him for some great man who had come with great news—probably of disaster. And they waited on him deferentially, and with a certain fear mingled with their respect.

The snow fell more thickly: Gabor could see the great flakes coming softly, softly against the huge, tall, blank win-

dows from which the stiff gold curtains had been hastily looped back. He could see the landscape becoming more and more grey, blotted into the silverness of the descending snowstorm.

He calculated coolly how far it was from Bosenberg to Ottenheim—how long it would take him to ride there. The obsequious servants were looking after his horse, which he had taken the precaution to change not so long ago. His mount would be as fresh as he was himself, and he was in every nerve alert.

The brief winter day was ending, and the darkness, hastened by the gathering snowstorm, came on suddenly; but still Gabor did not hasten. He knew his way and his plans very well. Not by a single moment would he miscalculate them.

He drank his opulent wine with relish: an Imperial vintage laid down with care by the late Emperor, who could never have guessed, in his most fantastic moments (and he had been a man of fantasy), how it would be thus used and enjoyed by the man who had proposed the destruction of his son.

At last, stretching himself sleekly, and making a last sneering obeisance at all those stiff, staring portraits on the high walls, Gabor left the Château of Bosenberg, and, warmly wrapped in his fur pelisse, took his leisurely way across the grey, desolate park; a deep silence stifled the landscape. There was no living creature in sight—not so much as one solitary bird left from autumn's revelry. Slowly, yet deliberately, Gabor rode towards Ottenheim.

THIRTY

ELEANORA beguiled the brief tedium of the drab winter day by trying on some of the finery which had at length arrived, despite the war, from elegant shops in the Palais Royal. One of the frocks pleased her very much: it was of *bleu de roi* velvet, with small, steel buttons, and gave her a more elegant appearance than she had ever had before. In this, she thought, she looked something like the great lady that every one had to pretend she was; but which she herself had thought that she could never be. She found great amusement in undoing these parcels, in taking out all these gorgeous trifles, all these sumptuous gowns, and turning them over and over again, till at length the Duchess peevishly chid her for frivolity.

"But what," asked Eleanora, "am I to do?"

And the Duchess had no answer ready. Boredom had indeed descended heavily upon Ottenheim. The Baroness Charlotte had returned, despite the war, to Anhalt-Dessau, summoned there by the illness of her father; and two of the other ladies had found excuses to hasten to Vienna. The Duchess and Eleanora were alone, with a few maids and the fantastic garrison, whose perpetual evolution and trumpet calls began to fray the Duchess's nerves. She would have given a good deal to return, if not to Vienna or Anhalt-Dessau, at least to Dürsheim; but Colonel Pons entreated—nay, almost commanded—her to remain where she was. Dürsheim, he declared, was not safe enough; nor was it possible to guard and protect it as Ottenheim was guarded and protected.

Eleanora also felt a sense of oppressive dulness. The gorgeous rooms of the Château began to be very full of shadows, and to look strangely; the house became to Eleanora even more alien than it had been at first. She was

apt to start if she heard sudden footsteps behind her, or glimpsed an open door on to a room which was not very familiar. Once she had returned to that obscure corridor, to look at the gallant picture of *The Magdalene Returning to the Pleasures of the World*: but it had gone. She guessed that either the Duchess or Colonel Pons had had it removed, and, with a kind of shamefaced timidity, she pondered whether there was not a great deal in the world about which she was not allowed to know, but that every one was in a sort of kindly conspiracy to hide from her. She had had, lately, glimpses of some such world from books she had found in Christian's library—the plays of Florian and Crébillon, with their slim, elegant engravings of harlequins and columbines, under the colonnades of French palaces. And now they had taken this picture away, when she had wished to look at it again and wonder about it. The fact of its removal gave it a great importance in the mind of Eleanora, and she began to con over all those odd details, of people, and beasts, and birds, and reptiles under those trees emblazoned with the most curious flowers and bedecked with the most grotesque leaves, beneath a sky brazen with lion-like sunshine.

She visited, also, the deserted theatre, and shivered, standing in the dusty, red stalls, where Banning and Hensdorff had lounged on the occasion of the minister's first visit to Ottenheim: She looked curiously at the curtained stage and at the Pulchinello bauble, which still lay where the young Swede had flung it down. She wondered if she would ever attend a play: perhaps when the Emperor was crowned there would be celebrations, and she would be there, as the Duchess had told her, with an ermine train and a little crown on her head; she had been assured that this was possible, though it seemed to her both remote and fantastic.

She had to write, as her guardian had reminded her, to Christian, to thank him for the arrival of the parcels from the French shops; but she put off this task, although she was so idle.

She was weary of writing all the simple events of the empty day in her little diary with the blue leather cover. She

was weary of her fine embroidery, and her delicate pencil-drawings of views on the Danube. She was at length even weary of trying on and taking off finery and posing before the mirror in her new gowns. And she was most weary of all of sitting in the Duchess's room and listening to the old woman's complaints and exhortations.

Neither did she want to hear Colonel Pons descant upon the triumphs of Prince Christian, for she understood nothing at all about those matters, and modern warfare seemed to her a very sad and tiresome matter indeed, although she so delighted in battles of fabulous knights in the long ago.

Eleanora was not any longer being carefully watched, for there was really nothing that she could do, nor had she, of course, any desire to leave the Château. It was, therefore, quite possible for her on late winter afternoons to leave the dozing Duchess and Colonel Pons, busy with his garrison, and go out quite alone into the park. The fountains were not playing now, and the last birds and the last leaves had perished from the bare trees. The snow was falling, but Eleanora, like the Northern maiden she was, rather relished the snow, and she was snugly attired, with a large muff of grey fur, and a thick wrap of the same round her throat. She walked rapidly, enjoying the stillness and watching the snow gradually covering the dry ground, the withered grass and the long, desolate *allées*, being all gradually bloomed with white. Nor did she greatly heed the advancing dusk. She would rather be alone in the park than alone in the Château.

As she crossed the long, straight avenue leading to the great gates, she saw a man coming towards her as if he had just entered the domains of Ottenheim; and she paused, wondering who it could be. For it was not one of the garrison, but a man in civilian clothes, and there was no one, save the servants, who wore civilian clothes; and even they were bedecked in liveries. And this man was in black, with a traveller's cloak, and a hat without a cockade.

Eleanora thought of the messengers who came so continually from Christian, with despatches and letters; but even

they were always in some manner of uniform. So she peered, curiously and not frightened, through the faint gloaming and the faint dusk; and when the stranger came a little nearer she realized that it was Captain Leopold—as she always called him in her thoughts.

She was conscious of the purest and most delicious joy; with untroubled candour, she flew up to her friend and put out her hand. She did not even remember who he really was.

“So you have come back at last!” she said.

Leopold took her hand in his, which were ungloved and chilled.

“Have you been waiting for me?” he whispered. And then they neither of them said any more, but stood looking at each other in the gathering snow and the gathering twilight. Leopold was dressed as she remembered him in the beechwoods at Dürsheim. His hair was unpowdered, and he had no official ornaments. There was nothing about him to remind her of the position he really held, or the name he really bore. Neither, to him, could she possibly seem the wife of Prince Christian, nor anything other than that girl whom he had left standing on her little balcony in the early morning light, on that day which now seemed so impossible and incredibly long ago.

“Let us come into the house,” she said. She asked no questions, she felt no wonder. His coming was a sheer piece of magic, an enchanted event.

But Leopold hesitated, and peered through the greyness at the imposing front of Ottenheim, and the double-winged stairs with the majestic statues like giant sentinels.

He had left his horse at the stables at the great gates. He did not know, when he had done so, whether he intended to stay at the Château or not; but now that he had met Eleanora, he knew that he did mean to stay. He was one who left much to chance. Had it so fallen that he had not seen the Princess, he might even, in debate with his own hot and troubled heart, have turned and have gone back to his own palace, leaving her to her fate.

"You have been ill?" he asked, looking at her anxiously.

But she shook her head, smiling:

"No; I have not been ill—why should you ask?"

He thought that she said this not to trouble him, and he spoke of her letter.

"You wrote to me, didn't you? I had your letter, and you must have wondered why I didn't answer it."

But again Eleanora shook her head.

"I never wrote to you," she said, wonderingly. "Why should I write?"

And once more, Leopold thought she said it out of modesty and timidity, or shame; and he blamed himself for having spoken of her letter. Not for one second did it occur to him that the same epistle was a forgery.

Eleanora did not ask him why he had come to Ottenheim in this unexpected and peculiar manner. She knew. She had forgotten Christian as completely as her companion remembered him.

"Will you stay with us?" she asked, ingenuously. "The Duchess will be surely pleased to see you." And then she smiled, and added: "And I think you are the Emperor: though that seems, somehow, grotesque."

"It is," said Leopold, "as you say, grotesque." He did not want to meet the Duchess of Schönbuchel. He would willingly have lingered in the dark. But the snow was falling fast, and the light was failing rapidly. He asked her who there was in the Château, and she said:

"Only Colonel Pons, the garrison and the servants. We have been lonely here, Monseigneur, I can assure you. But the Duchess says that we must wait patiently, as all the women wait, until the end of the campaign."

Leopold did not answer. He was looking at her intently. He drew her hand through his arm, and led her towards the Château. She seemed to him to be of the most unsurpassable and ideal beauty, even more a blossoming perfection than all his cherished memories of her, exquisite as those had been; and she acquiesced in his admiration, which seemed to her so lofty, so brave and beautiful. She

had a warm and glowing sense of deep joy, triumphant achievement, in just this one fact that he had come back.

As they reached the steps, he said, breathing quickly:

"Do you ever hear from—do you ever write to—Prince Christian?"

Eleanora said:

"My husband?"

And Leopold replied, abruptly:

"He is not your husband. That Lutheran ceremony was nothing."

Eleanora looked bewildered.

"It does not matter," she said; "does it matter? I don't know: the Duchess says I am his wife, and I, too, am a Lutheran, you know."

"But you need not be so always," replied Leopold. "You can change as he changed," he added, bitterly. "But do you write to him?"

And Eleonora, still startled and confused, said she had written two notes, and must write a third, for some clothes that he had sent her from Paris.

"Don't write again," replied Leopold. "Don't think of him any more. Don't concern yourself with him."

"But he is your general," said Eleanora, pausing on the steps, "and fights for you." She brushed the lingering snow-flakes from her grey muff with a nervous hand. "They say he has obtained great victories for you."

Leopold did not answer that.

"Let us come into the house," he muttered. "You are getting cold here."

Eleanora felt a close contact with him as they mounted the last of the shallow steps, where the tall, grey statues with their fluttering draperies, those Cæsars, goddesses and warriors, stood now forlornly and uselessly on guard, letting the enemy pass unmolested between their bare, haughty ranks.

Eleanora felt she understood his passion, his intention; and her senses warmed to a yielding concession. And yet she knew nothing, either of him or of what he meant to do;

she put her hand in his and drew him across the threshold, and as he entered those lofty and haughty doors he shuddered, and tried to forget who was the master of this opulent house.

The palace was already delicately warm and radiantly lit. After his long journey and his stay amid his own desolate splendours, which had seemed so unfriendly, Leopold, who was most sensuous, and whose senses were acute, delighted in this luxurious comfort and breathed with more freedom than he had breathed since he had left Brussels. It was a long tension come to a sweet conclusion.

He gave his modest hat and mantle to a waiting valet, who did not know him, or affected ignorance. In either case, Leopold took no concern with him, but followed the Princess Eleanora down the corridors to the room in which she usually sat in the afternoons, and there took his seat beside her, in front of the fire, as if he had returned after long absence to his own home.

She put aside her furs and her winter muffings, and sat silently looking at him. And he, returning that innocent gaze, felt his transient happiness too great for this world and likely to endanger his remembering of the next world: "If such a place there is!" he thought, ironically. Not for anything would he pause now, but take and value these moments to the full.

He had exposed himself to the full force of his own desires, and they possessed a strength that he could not pretend to resist.

"Why did you go away?" asked Eleanora, earnestly. "And why, Monseigneur, have you come back? And what is this you tell me about my marriage? Forgive me if I am foolish and very much confused!"

Leopold answered, slowly:

"Do not think of any of these things, but leave your destiny in my hands, where I think it has always been."

The Duchess, having heard from the valet of Leopold's arrival, came hastily into the big drawing-room, alarmed, and immediately on guard. When she saw the identity of the

visitor, she could scarcely, worldly and clever as she was, control her dismayed astonishment.

"You are surprised to see me here?" smiled Leopold, as he rose.

"I am surprised," said the old woman, rallying, "to see you, Sire, anywhere where you must of necessity lose your time."

And she looked at him with deep and defiant meaning. To this Leopold replied with equal meaning:

"Do you think I am that manner of man, Madame, who has no more courage but he must die upon the first denial? I pray you," he added, with some impatience, "do not bait me, for my humour has more of trouble than satisfaction in it, and will not easily be vexed."

"Sire," replied the old Duchess, standing her ground gallantly, although she was deeply afraid, "I do not understand your mood, but I find your visit here unsupportable. How is it possible that you have been able to leave your headquarters, which I believe to be now at Ems, in preparation for your coronation?"

"Madame," replied Leopold, quietly, "my affairs I have taken in my own hands, and I must request that you do not interfere with me."

The Duchess dropped a stiff curtsy, and replied, bitterly:

"This is not my house that I can bid you leave it; but it is Prince Christian's house; and that is a stronger reason, Sire, that you should take your instant departure!"

Eleanora did not understand the meaning of these quick words that passed between the two; but she knew that Leopold had returned, and that he must not go.

"There is no harm in his staying," she said, candidly. "Madame, pray do not bid him go: it is a snowy and a weary night, and he has come a long way to pay his duty to us!"

"Madame," Leopold asked, "why do you apprehend any displeasure from my visit? I have leave to come to Ottenheim, I believe?"

"The master of Ottenheim would scarcely give you that

leave, Sire," replied the old woman, grimly. "I dare swear he knows not you are here; and if you insist upon staying," she added, with spirit, "I can assure Your Majesty that you play the tyrant to very little purpose. It is but a poor conquest to frighten two poor, weak, silly women."

Leopold glanced at Eleanora, and said, softly:

"Do I affright you, sweet? Do I affright you?" And she shook her head and smiled at him, as if the Duchess were not there. The old woman was shivering. She leant heavily on her ebony stick with the silver apple on the top, which of late she had so frequently used.

"I cannot debate this calmly," she muttered. "Eleanora, child, leave us! Go to your room, and take up your furs and cloak, and set yourself ready for supper. No doubt Monseigneur will honour us with his company at that meal."

"I shall," replied Leopold, calmly, "a little while remain; and do you go as she bids you, Eleanora, and adorn yourself with your prettiest gown, so that we may, a little while, defy our fortune; this one pleasure we may snatch. I think," he added, in deep tenderness, "you have been but of a melancholy, cloudy humour here, shut away so long. Let us dispel that, if only for an hour!"

With a breathless, amazed timidity, and yet with high-mourning spirits, Eleanora curtseyed first to one and then to the other, and then left the room, Leopold escorting her to the tall, florid door.

When he returned, the Duchess was still standing erect, leaning upon her stick and glaring at him.

"I am bold enough, Sire," she said, immediately, "to see this visit to my charge as a fault, and to entreat you to leave us at once."

"You seem to hold me in slight esteem, Madame," smiled Leopold. "When I have spoken a little with the Princess Eleanora I will return to Bosenberg, as has ever been my intention."

"Lest we find a quarrel in it, Sire," said the old woman, firmly, "you will return before you see the Princess, whom I have just sent to her chamber to avoid such an interview."

"What do you know of me and her?" asked Leopold.

"Enough," replied the Duchess, at once, "not to leave you alone together."

Leopold smiled bitterly.

"You make little scruple of the matter, Madame," he replied, haughtily, "and I find also that you are hot in Prince Christian's favour."

"It is his house," said the Duchess, shortly, "and his wife."

"His house, yes," answered ~~Christian~~, "and I shall not long trouble him. But scarcely his wife, Madame; that Lutheran ceremony was nothing."

Leopold

"I thank you, Sire," said the Duchess, again with her stiff curtsy, "for your good usage. I also am a Lutheran, and you know, Sire, as I know, that that marriage was notably a marriage, before all the world; and, I believe, the price you paid for the services of Prince Christian, which have, Sire, proved invaluable."

Leopold did not answer, or feel in any way affected by what she said: and the Duchess was alarmed near to swooning by his silence.

"Colonel Pons is here," she said, hastily; "perhaps Your Majesty will speak with Colonel Pons."

"Let Colonel Pons join his master," answered Leopold, shortly. "Ay, and all the garrison also. Who is Prince Christian to keep his own estate here in Ottenheim? Tomorrow there shall be troops from Vienna. I have sent for them. They will relieve the guard of Ottenheim."

"You give me unquiet thoughts," said the Duchess, with quivering lips, "and I am dismayed and undone."

"And surprised, too, I think?" smiled Leopold. "Did you credit me with perfect resignation to my allotted fate? You had a hand in that too, I think, Madame; were one of those intriguers at Dürsheim who took Eleanora away from me."

"Good God!" cried the Duchess frantically. "All this is extravagance, no woman breathing is worth the trouble you give yourself, Sire! It has never been my humour to do any one injury—let alone yourself, whom I have always regarded as my Emperor. She was innocent enough to en-

courage you, and you were innocent enough to be encouraged. Let that all go, Sire, as children's play; and I beseech you, let us have an end of these crosses and afflictions. Return, I entreat you, to Bosenberg!"

"Do not rail," said Leopold; "no doubt you are sad and ill satisfied. But as you say, we can let these past matters be. I will take supper with you and begone. Will you have patience with me before Eleanora? May I not bribe you, in her presence, to wink at my manifest faults?"

"If you will go soon, I will be your bounden servant," said the Duchess, eagerly. "I will speak fair to your face and behind your back, Sire, if you will only begone—if you will not speak with her alone!"

"You guard her well!" smiled Leopold, sadly. "Prince Christian owes you a rich reward, Madame."

The Duchess came two trembling steps nearer to him across the firelit room.

"Sire, if you loved her passionately—nay, even if you loved her well, you could not see her ruined."

"Who said I loved her?" asked Leopold, faintly. "You take, Madame, strange matters on your tongue."

"I am old," stammered the Duchess, "and you must allow me a certain freedom. I spoke thus openly to Prince Christian, because I have a great affection for the girl; and he respected what he loved."

"Leave it!" said Leopold, interrupting swiftly; "leave it. I know she is as I last left her. Do me the courtesy to speak no more about it."

"And do you, Sire, forbear as he forbore?" cried the Duchess. "With whatever intention and purpose you came here, I do entreat you to forbear it."

"You think me fond and facile," smiled Leopold. "Contain your alarm, Madame: there is nothing so odd and singular in my visit here. The world is full of sudden accidents, as you should know by now. I entreat you to speak with more formality," he added, haughtily.

"I can scarce speak at all!" sighed the Duchess, trembling. She sat down on the settee where Eleanora had briefly rested.

"What news of Prince Christian?" she asked, breathlessly.

"He would scarcely send his news by me," said Leopold, smiling; "he is well enough, and crowned, Madame, as I think you know, by considerable victories; flushed with conquest and adorned with praise. Therefore, no more of him. He has his meed and his reward. In sober earnest, let us leave these matters! I come here for a little peace."

Eleanora entered the room lightly, servants with candles coming in behind her, so that she brought the sweetness and radiance of light with her. She wore the blue velvet gown with the little steel buttons. She had not been able to resist this tempting adornment. And, as she advanced to Leopold and he advanced to her, neither of them gave any heed to the defeated and frightened old woman on the settee.

"I have been mewed up here so long," smiled Eleanora, dimpling with mirth, "that I know little of the world's doings; and therefore you, Monseigneur, must entertain me with tales of what goes on abroad."

"But you," said Leopold, "will find no merit in battles and sieges, in the intrigues of politicians: and that is all I have to tell. It is to get away from those, Eleanora, that I have come to Ottenheim."

The lackeys set the candles about the room, in the sconces, upon the tables and before the elaborate mirrors. The Duchess felt cold, cold . . . and crouched over the fire.

"What shall we talk of, then?" asked Eleanora, her gaze still smilingly upon his face, "for here there is no news, save all the birds and many of the beasts have died; and everything is desolate and dull. The speedwell, Sire, lasted long, but even they have gone now; and neither the sky nor the river is blue any longer."

"And that is all your news?" breathed Leopold. "And mine does not come to as much as that! For I had not even noticed, as I rode, that all the lustre was gone from the landscape; and for your birds and beasts, Eleanora, I may easily get you others when the spring comes."

"He speaks," thought the Duchess, "as if he were going to make her his wife. I pray God it be no worse than that!"

She was in the greatest state of disorder at her own futility. When she heard the drums and trumpets sounding as usual from the garrison, calling the soldiers into the barracks for the night, she shivered with an even deeper fear. How useless this defiance of the enemy when the enemy was already within the gates! And ensconced, a welcome visitor, within the very threshold of the fortress; handling already the most guarded of cherished treasures. . . .

THIRTY-ONE

LEOPOLD had gone from Ottenheim, pale and smiling with formal words of farewell upon his lips. They had lit him out into the darkness of the snowy night, holding flambeaux so that he should see his way down the avenue to the noble gatehouse where he had left his horse.

He had declined all escort, and they had acquiesced in his mood; Pons and the Duchess, at least, deeply grateful to him that he thus took a decorous departure. Nor did the Princess Eleanora seem to grieve at his early going. She was smiling to herself as he had smiled to himself; both seemed wrapped in the fantasy of some inner secret.

She sang a little, sitting at the spinet, and did not speak of this singular visit from the Emperor; nor did the others dare broach such a subject in her presence.

At her usual hour, the Princess Eleanora went to her bed-chamber. The Duchess kissed her forehead when she said good night to her, and breathed over her a prayer and a blessing.

Supper had been brief and mostly silent; every one had spoken very little. The Duchess kissed Eleanora again, and bade her sleep well, and the girl said:

“Ah, yes! Sleep well!” as if she was not listening.

In her own large bedchamber she dismissed her maid as was her custom; simply she had been trained, and greatly she disliked ceremony about her intimacies. Her simple toilet was the work of her own hands. Alone then, in her great bedchamber that had been the bedchamber of Christian, she sat before her dressing table which stood between the two tall, curtained windows; and, from the pocket of the blue velvet dress, she took a peach, and squeezed the peach; and a gap in the downy fruit flew open, and there was a little note inside. Leopold had handed her the peach

at the supper table. How he had contrived to slip the note inside, she did not know. She read it gravely, with frowning brows and parted lips. It said:

"Set a light in your window when all the other lights are out, and I will come and say to you what they would not let me say to-night."

Eleanora sat thoughtfully, her elbow on her knee, her chin in her palm; her other hand fingered the note. And then she put it on the large tulipwood dressing table, among her trinkets—old-fashioned jewels that the Duchess had given her; her father's marriage gift; and those two green diamonds which had been Christian's parting present; that called Mitau and its fellow. Among all these glittering pretty trifles she laid the note; and then she looked up at herself in the dark depths of the mirror, between the two clusters of candles. Silver flowers bloomed round the exact circle of this mirror, and they seemed like blossoms rising in the moonlight from the depths of a midnight sea. And, in the middle of that sea, her face, with the pale hair falling back on her bare shoulders and her questioning eyes and wondering lips; like a nymph brought from the farthest recesses of a secret ocean, to question the strange doings of the mortal world.

Gravely she thought of him and of his letter. Then, slowly and one by one, she unbuttoned the steel buttons of her lawn chemise, letting the blue bodice relax and open on her bosom. Then she moved, and lightly drew aside the thick folds of the curtain, and looked out on to the blackness of the night. The snow had ceased, for the wind had risen, and was lifting the icy clouds and hurrying them away. There was even a rift in these dark vapours through which she could see a star, immeasurably far away, and darting icy, bluish rays into the blackness of the uttermost sky.

Nothing else could she see, neither the path nor the prospect, nor the river, nor Leopold. Nothing else, only that one star; and she drew the curtain again and shivered back into the warmth of her room.

Why had they always been thwarted? She believed now

that they had been intended for each other, and that these other people had come between. Slowly she unbuttoned the steel buttons on her bosom. . . . Come between and altered everything; and so they had to suffer. Yes; he had suffered, she was sure. He had not wanted to ride away, and he had come back through difficulty—even through disaster, she thought; but she did not know—there was really nothing that she did know. How completely ignorant they had kept her about everything!

But *he* knew. He had said that she was not married to that silent, stately soldier, that man who had come to her bed at midnight and given her those green diamonds, who was so dark and grand. He had said that that ceremony was nothing.

She would have liked to ask him to explain that. She had a fluttering, beating hope that it might be true; and they had not allowed him a chance to speak to her. They had had to sit there, with those two old people watching and listening—jealous, disillusioned people, with their sneers and their cold looks! What had he come to Ottenheim for? What did he wish to say to her? Perhaps he would go away on the morrow, and she would never see him again, and then the end of the campaign would come—that conclusion about which they all talked. And with the end of the campaign there would be the spring, and that man Christian would come back, to claim her as his wife . . . his wife? She hardly knew what that meant. . . . Leopold might tell her.

She buttoned up her bodice and pulled apart the curtains, and in the aperture between them she set one of the clusters of candles on her dressing table, then extinguished the other; so that there was but this one light in the room, and that glowing from the window-place.

She leant beside this light, and tried to see the other windows of the palace. She thought they were all in darkness. Every one went to bed early these winter nights. There was only the sentry pacing round, and Leopold would know of that and avoid him. It was not difficult to mount to her room, which was low and had a wide balcony. He could

mount on some of those figures, with their floating draperies, that looked out so stonily before them across the park. Eleanora flung back the window, and shuddered at the icy shaft of night air and the few fainting snow flakes that flew in across her shoulders.

She waited; she walked up and down; she took one of Christian's presents—a long scarf of white lace—and put it round her shoulders and took it off again, and then again put it round, shuddering; and then returned to the window and peered blindly into that cold, inscrutable darkness.

And then he came: then he was outside, all dressed in darkness like the night; and then he had slipped in between the open windows, and closed them, and moved the light, and drawn the curtains, and was beside her at last.

"Oh, my darling! Oh, my love!" She felt the snowflakes on his cheeks, and his cold fingers pressing through the thin lace on her shoulders; how he was trembling—it seemed as if he could scarcely stand.

"Ah! Was it for this you came?" she whispered, hardly knowing what she said, nor caring.

And he replied:

"For this, for this and nothing else!"

She lay in his arms, still and content; and then she sighed and drew away, and took his mantle off, and laid it by the fire.

"You are wet," she said; "you are wet, my dear. You have come through the snow; you have been waiting in the cold."

"Waiting so long!" sighed Leopold. In his nervous haste he had not closed the window sufficiently. The latch flew, and the bitter gust that entered blew out that cluster of candles that had guided him. There was no illumination left to them but the dying light of the fire on the marble hearth.

"Oh! Let us light some more!" whispered Eleanora.

But Leopold shook his head.

"That is very well," he said; "if we leave a light some one may see it, and no one must know that I am here."

"No one must know," she repeated.

Leopold rose from the settee where he had sunk beside the dressing table, and bolted the door.

"I can make her an Empress," he murmured to himself. "Yes, it is all well, for I can make her an Empress."

She was gravely spreading his wet cloak before the glow of the fire. There he joined her, raised her and made her sit on the low couch beside him.

"Your hands are cold also," he said, fondly.

"I too have been waiting," she answered, simply. "I could never understand why you went away. Surely you knew, my dear, that I wanted you to stay?"

"Yes, I knew," he said, and he drooped his head upon her kind bosom. "Oh, do you love me?" he whispered. "Love me, love me, love me?"

"I suppose," she answered, ingenuously, surprised at the flutter in her own breast, in her throat, "I suppose this is love—what I have so often read about."

She put her arms about him, and rested her cheek on his bent blond head. She felt a dim, vague horror at the thought of the other man, and she shuddered even in that moment. Though she did not dare speak of it, she could not rid herself of the thought of Christian.

Yet who need ever know that she had received Leopold in her chamber? Surely they were safe! Neither the Duchess nor Colonel Pons would think of this.

Leopold, holding her fast and staring into the magic of the sinking fire, was lost in thinking of this great and delicious happiness, a very weariness and overflow of content. He could spy no flaws in the perfection of his bliss; nor spared any regret for yesterday nor any fears for to-morrow. To him this perfect moment was sufficient. Yet they had not sat there above five minutes or so when they were disturbed. There was a tap upon the door that Leopold had bolted, and then another, more insistent; and then the Duchess's voice, asking anxiously:

"Eleanora, are you well?"

Though she had seen Leopold ride so deliberately away,

she was not a woman easily to disarm her suspicions.

"Answer her," whispered Leopold, very low and never stirring. "Answer her, dearest, and say you are well."

And Eleanora, with a guile that she had never suspected in herself, answered in a trembling voice that passed for drowsiness:

"Oh, I am very well; why do you disturb me when I am nearly asleep?"

The old, dry tones of the Duchess coming through the locked door sounded relieved.

"I am glad of it," she replied, simply; "I thought you might be wakeful and would like to talk with me over a cup of chocolate."

But Eleanora answered:

"No; I am nearly asleep. Good night, Madame; good night!"

And they heard the footsteps of the Duchess going heavily away down the antechamber.

They both listened to the last sound of these painful footsteps die away, and then they looked at each other, and like two children laughed.

"Why, if this is happiness," cried Leopold, in an access of joy, "then I have never been happy before!"

He hung about her neck and kissed her again and again, till she grew faint and rosy under his eager lips, and faintly besought him to go—to go now!

But Leopold asked, gaily:

"Will you not be at the trouble of entertaining me longer?" Then, to comfort and distract her, he admired her velvet gown, and the elegant glitter of the steel buttons on her bosom. "Where did you get it?" he asked; and she murmured that it was a Paris elegancy, sent by Christian from the Palais Royal; and that man's name sounded odd and horrible upon her lips, and she blushed the deeper as she spoke the words.

"Now I detest it," said Leopold, imperiously, "and I will not have you wear it!"

And his fingers began to unbutton the bodice as she had

unbuttoned it half an hour ago, exposing the veils of lawn on her gentle bosom.

She prevented his labours by clinging to him in a desperate closeness. Her heart was beating so quickly that she thought she was going to faint.

"I am all amazed," she murmured; "it seems as if some miracle had happened. All the world is changed. How is it possible that you are here?"

"How is it possible," he replied between his kisses, "that I was ever away?"

They sat there close and closer, while the fire slowly dropped out; and she did not notice that her open bodice had fallen and his blond hair was across her bare breast.

She made some disjointed complaints, telling him to go, oh, to go, and again to go! But he took no heed, save to kiss those protesting lips the more.

The wind rose, and they could hear it swelling in the chimney and fluttering that last glow of the dying coal. They heard it also moan at the window with a stately sigh; and presently they heard the distant footsteps of the sentries, and their salutations as they passed each other in the night. And then the sentries went into the distance, and the wind fell again; and for a long space was still. And Leopold said:

"I'll go, my love; I'll go!" and did not stir.

And she said:

"Yes, leave me now!" and neither did she move from his embrace.

The shadows were tumultuous and menacing in the high room—large, vague, mighty shadows, cast by that pale handful of fire, those dying flames: shadows that seemed to advance and bear down on those two, sitting so close together on the wide settee; shadows that wavered and spread like clutching, threatening hands and mighty outraised weapons over them . . . over those two fair heads, where the long curls now intermingled; over that close embrace, nearer, closer, nearer. . . .

She told him how the last bird had died that day—a

gorgeous creature with emerald plumes and silver crest. She had kept it long in a little palace of gilded wires, and fed it on sops made with cream; and yet still it had died, without regret, she thought. "He could not endure the winter of the north," she sighed. "It must have seemed to him as if life had stopped indeed." And, in a low tone, with her lips close to his cheek, she continued to talk about this bird as if it were a fairy-tale she had heard in childhood. She did not indeed know if it were reality or not, the story that she was so faintly telling; for reality had ceased to exist for her. She only remembered the lovely thing that had died, and her pity for it; her certainty that he would pity it also.

From the stables a clock struck and then another sounded from the recesses of the palace. They counted twelve strokes. And then, in what seemed to them five minutes' time, they counted one stroke. And Leopold said:

"Before we know we have even met together, it will be the dawn." And he added, in the first terror he had felt since he had entered her chamber: "Before the dawn I must be gone—before the light. . . ."

But now, she who had urged his going would not let him go.

"It is a long while yet to the dawn," she pleaded. "Winter's dawn comes late; and you must stay, for I am now frightened to be left alone!"

"I will take you away to-morrow," said Leopold, moving the hair from her brow and staring down into the face which he could scarcely see in this dim light. "To-morrow I will take you away. To-night is mine."

She began to weep, hidden upon his shoulder: weeping for she knew not what; weeping without let or hindrance, and yet without real pain or fear. The shadows were all merging into one monstrous shadow which engulfed them both.

Eleanora slipped to her knees beside him, overwhelmed by this insistent darkness.

"I have not said my prayers to-night," she whispered.

"This is the first time, Monseigneur, that I have not said my prayers."

"Could you not," he answered, "forget them once, for me?"

"Why," she said, searching for him in the dark, "I could forget everything for you! And indeed, Monseigneur, I believe that I have forgotten it!"

Again the wind, gentle and majestic in the wide chimney, and faintly rustling the white ashes of the last coals, the last glowing sparkles on the hearth.

"Perhaps the stars are out," murmured Eleanora, faintly. "Shall we not go, my love, and see?"

They went together to the window, rapt in this lovers' whim to gaze upon the stars together, and she gently moved the curtain aside. The night was clear, and there was a large rift, like a lake or inland sea of blackness in which there sparkled the clustered planets of the Pleiades.

But Leopold thought of the sentries, and almost instantly pulled the dark and heavy folds closely again together. If the sentries had been at that moment passing, they could not possibly have seen this drawing of the curtain before the darkened room. But there was some one who did see it, and that was Gabor, the Transylvanian, who waited patiently, wrapped in his dark cloak, upon the balcony. He had been there ever since he had seen Leopold enter Eleanora's chamber. He waited with infinite calm, and infinite expectation; nor for one second did he relax his watchfulness. His eyes were ever on those windows, and they flickered at once to that one where there was a movement. He saw Leopold's white hand, even in this obscurity; he saw the blur of it on the curtain, and the faintest glow of interior firelight; and then he saw it withdrawn and the curtains pulled together.

And he gave a sigh, as one who sees his desires at length accomplished: after much labour, accomplished; he folded his arms and leant against the stone, not feeling the chill or the winds on his face, nor noticing the stars, nor the snow clouds that raced in front of them and then again left them bare in the plenitude of splendour; not heeding the sentries,

who now and then passed below him; not heeding nor caring for any of these things; but keeping guard on the windows of the chamber of Eleanora.

The longer Leopold stayed therein, the better for him; and yet, if he stayed no longer—well enough! For any subterfuge or evasions or excuse, or gloss or flourish, it was now too late. . . .

Gabor had insinuated himself without difficulty into Ottenheim. He had not here ridden up boldly to the front door, but crept in at the back, and so made his way to the quarters of the officers of the garrison, where he was well known, and considered eminently useful. Many of them were not even aware that he had left the service of Christian, and none of them knew the cause or extent of his disgrace. It had not, then, been difficult for him to do exactly as he wished during those hours in which he had first arrived at Ottenheim.

Now, as the time passed and he began to feel chilled, he paced up and down, a very patient sentry, walking lightly so as not to disturb the lovers. "Though I dare say it would take a great deal to distract them," he smiled to himself. And presently he took a flask, engraved with arms to which he had no right—the arms of Gabor—and drank from it a stiff dose of brandy; and then fell to his pacing again, to keep the blood circulating in his veins. For the night increased in coldness.

He heard the cock crow, and stretched and yawned in his warm pelisse. He saw the faint creeping dawn come up over the river, and the great squadrons of clouds leap and fly in the freshening wind, away over the Château, away across the park; and still he kept his exact and patient vigil; and still he heard no sound from the Princess Eleanora's chamber. He turned his thoughts deliberately to Prince Christian. What had Prince Christian been doing this most momentous night? He would make it his business to find out some day. Probably the Generalissimo had been working hard through all these cold, black hours, labouring in the cause of Leopold. There might come a time when Gabor

would like to remind them both of that; when such a recollection would be a fine twist in a bitter wound; an extra poignant pang to an already perfect agony.

The dawn was strengthening. "Imprudent, imprudent and inexperienced," sneered Gabor, "how late he leaves it!"

But for himself the moment had come. Action could no longer be delayed. He tapped, lightly but with brisk determination, upon the window where he had watched so long; and then he pressed the window, laughing almost aloud, to find it was not latched. How confident they had been—how raw to this manner of intrigue. . . .

He pushed the window wider, and boldly entered the bed-chamber of the Princess Eleanora.

For all his insolent effrontery, he was startled to find that she was so near to him; for he had heard no movement in the room, and had believed them both still asleep. But she was sitting there, close to the window by her dressing table, all disarrayed, with her hair falling to her waist and her hands holding up her face while she gazed into the mirror, which was yet so dark that she could behold no reflection therein.

Her girdle and her garters, her bodice and her gown, lay on the floor beside her; and as Gabor made his stealthy entry he stepped on them, not without an emphasis of contempt.

She slowly turned from her contemplation of her own face, and stared at him with an expression of utter, amazed horror; so stony and so dreadful that even he was faintly moved.

"Hush!" he said, fearing that when she recovered from her partial terror she would shriek. "Hush! There is nothing, Madame, to fear; I have kept watch outside your window, when I think you most needed watch and ward. Come! Will you not give me a reward for that—you or your cavalier?"

As he spoke, his keen eyes searched the dusky twilit room for Leopold. He could not see him, and for a moment felt an evil pang lest his prey should have escaped. But Elea-

nora betrayed herself instantly. She glanced over her shoulder at the curtained bed, and in a voice of horror she said, childishly:

"He is still asleep."

"Then you would do well to wake him," sneered Gabor. "The daylight strengthens with every second."

Drawing horrible recollections from even further depths of terror, Eleanora recognized that pallid face, that spare figure, those ashy eyes and sneering lips. She remembered Gabor in the beechwoods at Dürsheim, and he seemed to her now, as he had seemed to her then, a fiend.

"Come! Do not be alarmed!" he said, softly, amused by her excess of terror. "I am safe—I shall not speak; but will you not give me something as a pledge of that silence?" And his tired eyes roamed over the trinkets that glittered on the dressing table. "I have kept good watch," he added; and he could not forbear a smile of deep triumph. When she had last seen him, she had seen him struck across the face; and now he beheld her, crouching there half naked, while her lover slept behind her in her bed.

He leant forward, and his lean fingers picked up the two green diamonds, one of the Kurland regalia. Well he could remember them, and Herr Lippmann matching them one with another. . . .

"Will you give me these?" he asked.

And she replied, in an expressionless voice:

"Take them away! I never want to see them again—take anything."

Gabor placed the gems in his pocket, and Eleanora, with a lunatic gesture, leaned forward and covered up the mirror, as if she could not endure that it should witness her disaster.

"Rouse Monseigneur!" whispered Gabor; it was no part of his design that the household should know of Leopold's visit to Eleanora—that he should be seen in the brightening light escaping from her room.

But Eleanora could not move; and Gabor, gazing at her curiously, thought that she would faint, or even die, before his eyes.

But Leopold was roused at last. He stood between the jerked-back bed curtains, half dressed, in the dull twilight. Immediately he recognized Gabor; immediately, also, he recognized the trap, the snare, the spy—catastrophe.

"You blackguard!" he murmured, through bleached lips; and then stood speechless before his fate.

Ferdinand Gabor was glib—serene.

"Monseigneur," he said, with a bow, "Count Hensdorff told me to watch over Your Majesty. I have kept good ward outside this lady's window; and now it is scarcely prudent that you should linger. May I advise you to go, Sire, immediately?"

Eleanora clutched her shift closer about her shoulders; a useless gesture, for she was nearly naked.

"Go," she said, looking at neither of the two men, "go."

Gabor needed no dismissal; he did not stay to hear the half-crazed reproaches and denunciations of Leopold. He bowed to both of them; nor was his smile lost on either. He went as he had come, daintily, through the window, and lowered himself carefully from the low balcony, and slipped away and round the house and through the courtyard; and so, unobserved and carelessly, to his own quarters.

Leopold stared at Eleanora, and could find nothing to say; and she put her face in her hands, and sat still before the dressing table, as Gabor had found her.

"Spying for his own ends, or really sent by Hensdorff?" Leopold wondered, in bitter distraction. But he could stay for nothing. The perilous light was brightening too rapidly. Of all things, he must not be caught here in her chamber.

"To-day," he stammered, dazed by this bitter awakening, "my love, to-day or to-morrow I will take you to Bosenberg."

But Eleanora did not speak or move.

He put on his sword, and long his fingers fumbled with the strap; flung his coat, still damp, over the disorder of his dress—picked up his cloak which lay where she had placed it last night, in front of the cold and ashy hearth, which then had warmed and lit their deep embraces. In a second the

women would be astir : how could he have slept so sound on such a night ?

"Unbolt the door," he whispered, "quickly ! Pick up your clothes and get back to bed !"

But still she, sitting motionless before the scattered trifles on her dressing table, made no response ; nor dared he linger.

This was a bitter awakening from a rapturous dream ; he shrank from the cold, harsh greyness of the winter morning, and turned back, hesitant even now.

"Eleanora, say one word to me before I go !"

Then she looked up, and he saw that she had changed since yesterday.

"Come for me soon !" she whispered, and hid her face again.

Leopold leant over her, and touched the light hair of her fallen head with cold lips ; then left her, in a panting hurry. On to the balcony—over the balcony—down into the courtyard. It was still too dark for him to be easily perceived. The shadows were numerous yet ; the light false and uncertain. He turned aside from the imposing façade of the Château, and moved quickly into the path and among the bare trees ; he drew a breath of agonized relief. No one need know ! He had sent his horse away last night—sent it by a groom to Bosenberg. No one need know, and he could marry her—ay, and crown her too, that other ceremony was as nothing. A letter to Rome, and it would be on the instant dissolved—he had done no wrong, he passionately told himself ; yet he looked back at her window with remorse and pain and bitter regrets. The flames had burnt out, and the ashes were cold and colourless indeed ; something had been squandered that should have been hoarded, something defiled that should have been cherished ; he had already stared at her with the eyes of satiety and found her in that dishonoured abandon of the hideous dawn, less beautiful.

He made his way unobserved across the park, moving, ever hurriedly, away from the Château. Never had he known the world look so chill and drab ; never had he seen a sky so

heavy, nor woods so utterly bare. And faintly, slowly, the snow was beginning to fall again.

Was it last night that he and Eleanora had looked at that rift in the storm clouds and seen the planets with their blue fire? Time had fallen into a confusion for him. He must send for Gabor; Gabor must be bought or silenced, in some manner bought or silenced. He wondered in torment how he could find Gabor. . . .

The Transylvanian was already riding away, with the green diamond named Mitau, and its fellow, in his pocket.

THIRTY-TWO

CHRISTIAN had not been able immediately to follow up those brilliant and dashing successes which had startled Europe. His medley of troops, his unruly councils of potentates, were not immediately to be co-ordinated into one manageable whole. De Lisle, the Commander-in-Chief's main support on the field and in the closet, had fallen ill; other French officers, who held their position more by reason of their rank than their abilities, fell into a quick disaffection, many jealousies among themselves, and a combined jealousy of Christian.

Marshal Knittelfeldt had been defeated in Bavaria. The Imperialists had been forced to fall back in Italy, and the Allies, smarting from their successive defeats and their enormous loss of towns and forts, crowned by that supreme loss of Brussels, that capital and citadel they had so long held as a gauge, it seemed, of ultimate success, were making a supreme and impressive effort to retrieve both their prestige and their territory. For weeks Christian had manœuvred from one position to another, striving to force the enemy into another open engagement, in which he felt quite confident of his usual success; but the Allies avoided such a perilous meeting, while they gathered strength and exercised themselves in inflicting a series of small defeats on the lesser generals who served Leopold. The absence of the Emperor from the headquarters, and also the paucity of any news concerning his movements or his intentions, helped to influence the already reluctant and disaffected spirits of the officers, and, in a way, to dampen the ardour of the men. There seemed no definite symbol of what they were fighting for; and the war, already long and purposeless, seemed to lengthen and become even more indefinite in aim and object.

Christian alone held the Imperialists together. What he did not himself do was not done. Caring for no one, and not naturally affable, nor making any effort to charm or impress, he yet had achieved a stupendous position by the sheer force of his qualities. His inflexible resolve, his impeccable courage, his expert knowledge, superb self-confidence and long-accustomed air of command and authority, gave him an almost independent position among the troops, and held in check even those officers who most chafed against his position, and most insolently wished to assert their own prerogatives. Though many of these took a malicious pleasure in making matters as difficult as possible for the Generalissimo, none of them dared, openly and outwardly, to thwart his designs or oppose his command.

And, though the intention to fight through the winter months was universally unpopular, there were not many officers who had dared to take advantage of their position to return to their homes.

Christian was ill seconded, both in the Commissariat, the engineers, and the financial affairs of the campaign. In all these departments was ineptitude and a certain confusion. Money, food, and all necessary material began to be scarce in the camps. Christian found himself obliged to draw on his own resources for some necessary payments. Leopold's ministers were both useless and indifferent. It was not easy, even for Christian, with his gift of organization, to create order out of chaos in such a moment, in a war-racked country, the enemy pressing in on all sides.

The harvests, though they had now been taken in, were poor and scanty. It was difficult to feed the men, even more difficult to feed the horses. Christian had inherited a large sum of other men's indifferences, blunders and carelessnesses, to say nothing of corruption and thievery. Those whom he reproved sneered behind his back at his own fortune—gained, as they reminded each other, by some such means; his father had contrived, the malcontents grumbled, when in command of the Imperial resources, to fill the money bags with the sums which he was now enjoying.

Christian took no heed to any of them. He was completely absorbed and occupied by the performance of his arduous duties, and the concentration on his immediate goal—that of bringing the campaign to neat and outwardly successful conclusion, and of crowning Leopold in Frankfurt. He permitted nothing to vex or irritate him. He had been quite prepared for all these annoyances, difficulties and unpleasantnesses, and serenely resolved to succeed in spite of them. "Nothing," he said, "shall prevent me doing that which I have set out to do."

But even this heroic patience began to be frayed by the continued absence of Leopold. He did not even know—and no one else seemed to know, either—where the Emperor was: certainly not in Vienna, Berlin or Dresden. And Hensdorff, who had gone in search of him, sent no letter. The severe weather became like another enemy in the field: cold, fog and rain darkened day after day; the roads became impassable, the rivers swollen. The usual illnesses of an army were accentuated by exposure to the inclement season. Many grumbled openly about this continued keeping in the field long after the usual time for concluding a campaign. There was no excuse, they said, for not going into winter quarters immediately. The Imperialists had achieved sufficient glory for the moment.

Christian took no notice of any of these complaints. It was not his intention to suspend operations for a moment until he had accomplished his task and earned his rewards; steadily he kept before his eyes, Kurland and Eleanora.

He had noticed that for the last week or two there had been no letters from Ottenheim, but this did not greatly trouble him. He knew the condition of the roads, and the numerous delays to which even the most expert and swiftest messengers were subjected; and he continued to send off, as usual, his instructions to his steward, to Colonel Pons and to the Duchess of Schönbuchel. He had from the first resolved that nothing should shake his patience or his equanimity; and that resolution was not likely to be lightly shaken. He preserved, not only his outward composure, but his inner

high, mounting spirits. He looked beyond the present grey, laborious days, and saw the spring at Ottenheim, and on the banks of the Danube; and with indomitable courage and unfaltering energy, he pressed daily nearer Frankfurt, where he had bidden all such potentates and princes as supported Leopold to meet him, and where he had urged Hensdorff to tell the Emperor to summon a Diet.

Hampered by the illness of De Lisle, the hostility of the French second-in-command, De Brissot, and the return, with the increasing evil weather, of many of the French princes of the blood to Paris; harried by the enemy, pressing down from Hanover, Westphalia and the Netherlands, Christian, learning from his agents that the enemy were concentrating directly across his painful line of arduous march, paused at Limburg hoping to hear at least from Hensdorff, if he did not receive in person the Emperor himself. His operations, as he to his cost knew, were extended over far too wide a field. He had not sufficient troops to hold what he had taken. And even if he had been far more faithfully and ably seconded, his task touched the impossible; the enemy were so firmly wedged into the country, Austria being surrounded by hostile troops, in Hungary, in Bavaria, in Styria and Poland, which was divided alike in arms and politics.

The King of France showed no inclination to send further troops to participate in a war which was no concern of his, and the glory of which redounded to another monarch's credit.

The English, Hanoverians and Dutch, rapidly reinforced, had advanced again through the Palatinate and flung themselves across Christian's path, occupying the range of the Taunus and the town of Wiesbaden. A regiment of French cavalry, under General Châterault, who had striven to oppose them, had been almost annihilated.

In these conditions, Christian made his concentration camp at Limburg, and there drew up all available troops, leaving only the least possible garrisons in his late conquests. He had never had the number of men for which he

had asked, and those he had received were decimated by losses in battle, by illness, and, in some cases, even by desertion. Many of his regiments were only raw, pressed men of no discipline or training. The veteran troops, which he had enrolled and trained himself, did not amount to very many. The French troops were excellent, but indolent and disaffected to the cause for which they fought. The indignant murmur, "We should have stayed in Brussels for the winter," grew and swelled in Christian's camp.

He remained silent, disclosing his mind to no one. When he had been two days at Limburg, Count Hensdorff arrived at the camp. Christian's headquarters were in a small, abandoned country house outside the town, on a slight eminence crowned by a group of now bare poplars. In the meagre park were encamped his own regiments of Uhlans and Black Cuirassiers. The house being too small for the continuous business which had to be transacted, a number of tents and pavilions had been erected by the outbuildings. On the highest gable of this modest country residence blew the Imperial flag, and beside it the flag of Kurland. A wind was tearing the high, dark clouds to pieces, and scattering them across a pallid sky. It was bitterly cold, and Hensdorff shivered as he entered the low doorway; shivered and beat his hands together in their thick fur gloves.

As he entered the room where he knew he must meet Christian, he closed his eyes.

Christian was seated by a table on which there were spread papers which, for once, had nothing to do with battles or sieges, or any of the paraphernalia of war. The two quiet, elderly-looking men with him did not wear swords; one was an architect, the other a gardener and florist; and what they had spread before them was the plans of gardens and pavilions and houses.

Christian had brought these two men in his train from Brussels, and every available moment of leisure he devoted to discussing with them the proposed additions and improvements to Ottenheim . . . to the palaces in Mitau.

He had the usual princely taste for gardening and building,

and his diversion and delight was the erecting of noble palaces, and the laying out of magnificent parks. As he listened to the florist explaining his parterres, his cascades and fountains, he totally forgot the laborious weight of his military undertakings; and he saw the papers before him transformed into a delicious, visionary future—his sons' horses in those long, low, neat stables; his daughters plucking blooms from those elegant vases set on tall terraces; and Eleanora, the presiding goddess of this earthly paradise, wandering beneath those lofty trees which should shade the sumptuous rococo of a Grecian temple.

But when he noticed Hensdorff, he put aside these plans instantly, and dismissed the two men. He had a not uncordial feeling for the minister, and never had he been more pleased to see any one than he was to see Count Hensdorff now.

Count Hensdorff slowly, almost painfully, took off his cloak, his hat, his fur gloves, and huddled himself into the chair by the stove.

"I have been ill," he muttered briefly; and still he did not look at Christian. "I ought to have written before," he added, in a mumbled tone of apology. "I must beg you, Monseigneur, to excuse me. I have indeed been ill."

Christian was secretly intolerant of illness. Any failure of mind or body were alike incomprehensible and abhorrent to him. But he answered kindly:

"I am very sorry to hear that, my dear Count. You certainly do not look well." And he marked, with some amazement, the changed, haggard and ruined aspect of Hensdorff, who appeared now an old and broken man. "De Lisle is also ill," he added, "and that hinders me, for I get very little support from any one else." There being no reply to this, Christian rose, and asked: "When is the Emperor returning to headquarters?"

Hensdorff muttered:

"Soon, I believe."

"Where has he been?" asked Christian, patiently thinking that Hensdorff was ashamed because of Leopold's defi-

ciencies, and wished to spare him; Christian pitied him for serving such a master.

"He will be here, I think," murmured Hensdorff, carefully, warming his hands at the earthenware stove, "in a day or so."

"Where has he been?" repeated Christian. "With a woman?"

And Hensdorff, shivering as if the coals gave off an icy blast instead of heat, replied:

"Yes; with a woman."

Christian shrugged and smiled.

"Well, I hope you will keep him from any more such vagaries. I can assure you, my dear Count, that I have my hands full as it is."

"I know that," replied Hensdorff. And now he did bring himself, though with something of an effort, to turn in his seat and look at Christian. He somehow foolishly expected to see the soldier changed, as he felt he had himself changed since they had last met. It was odd and terrible to Hensdorff to see Christian appear exactly the same. He was in field-marshal's uniform, and the full panoply of martial state; for he had just come in from a parade of his Uhlans, where he had taken the review in the absence of the Emperor. His appointments were exact and neat in every detail: his laces as fine, his stars as glittering, his looped cords as burnished; he wore The Golden Fleece, as sparkling, no tarnish anywhere; his hair was powdered, pomaded and elaborately dressed; his eyes appeared slightly fatigued and shadowed; but apart from this, Hensdorff could detect no trace of fatigue, depression or ill health in his handsome, serene and almost expressionless face. And the minister thought, with a dull sense of relief in his sickened mind: "Perhaps, after all, he has no feelings."

Christian, walking up and down the room, and speaking lightly in his soft voice, began to tell the minister of his situation and his plans; of the many lacks and wants of the troops; and of his intention to push forward to Frankfurt, even across the imposing army of the Allies.

"Nothing," he declared, "will hearten our men and dispirit the Allies more than to have the Emperor crowned. This is also part of my bargain, and I am anxious that it should be accomplished as soon as possible."

Hensdorff listened to these words without their conveying much sense to his mind, which was overladen and oppressed by other thoughts. All the while he was considering Christian; not what Christian said, but the man himself, in all his theatrical and superb beauty; his neatness, precision and elegance; his almost dandified pride and grace, which concealed, as Hensdorff well knew, such supreme capacities of leadership, such laborious genius and such unflinching heroism.

He roused himself to say that supplies of men and money were coming from Vienna and Dresden; even, he hoped, from Berlin, where the King of Prussia, always agile in his own interests, had returned, promising to appear at Frankfurt for the Coronation of Leopold. Hensdorff went into all these details civilly, and with little spirit. Christian could not fail to mark his extreme lassitude, and wondered, ironically, if he had quarrelled with Leopold.

Pausing by the narrow window, and looking out into the dark and windy day, Christian asked when exactly the Emperor would arrive.

"Can he review the troops before we leave Limburg?" he asked. "I would not, at the outside, delay here more than two days. I am waiting for some French cavalry reinforcements, but I shall not wait overlong. De Lisle has a little recovered, also, and I hope that he can mount a horse almost immediately."

Hensdorff rose.

"The Emperor should be here to-morrow or the day after to-morrow," he said, stiffly.

Christian did not press him further, but asked if he had found lodgings in Limburg; and Hensdorff said no, he had given no thought to that.

"I will send one of my aides-de-camp," said Christian, "who will see that you are fairly housed."

Hensdorff shook his head mutely, as if his lodging was of no matter to him; and Christian, moved by a generous impulse towards the minister, who looked so old, so shattered and so fatigued, stepped up to him and clasped his hand.

"My dear Count, for my sake you must look after yourself, for you are the only man on whom I can rely!" As he spoke thus, in an accent of kindliness, Christian was surprised to see Hensdorff wince, and turn away, quickly withdrawing his hand.

"I beg Your Highness not to rely on me," he said, heavily; "for I have served you very ill."

Christian knew that he referred to the conduct of Leopold, and replied, lightly:

"As for His Majesty, my dear Count, we all knew from the first what material we had to deal with there. Believe me, I am not in the least discomposed. If he arrives at Limburg to-day or to-morrow, we shall still do very well."

Hensdorff looked at him queerly.

"Do you intend to give battle?"

"Indeed I do," said Christian. "Before the men get further disheartened, fatigued and corrupted. This campaign must be success after success, or complete failure. We cannot afford to wait, or even to pause. The Empire is too divided, and the Queen of Hungary too strong."

Hensdorff did not answer; the picture of when and how he had last seen Leopold was so clearly before his own mind that it seemed to him that the other man must see it too—Bosenberg, soon after a winter dawn, and he waiting there, in the great room with the pictures of dead Imperial rulers; waiting there, walking up and down the long floor, looking out of the long windows, seeing the dawn brighten so reluctantly in the sullen sky; waiting for Leopold to return from that secret journey on which he had gone, his servant did not know when or how. And the return of Leopold at last, walking unsteadily, almost like a drunken man, letting his cloak fall apart over his disordered undress; his hair loose, his sword half unbuckled, staring at Hensdorff with blank eyes. Dreadful meeting . . . and one still so poignant

and vivid in Hensdorff's mind that it seemed grotesquely impossible that it was unknown to this other man, standing so serenely before him; and he thought, with a kind of desperate curiosity: "How is it possible that that could happen, and he not know?"

Christian continued to talk of the details of the campaign; of the unmanageable insolence of many of the high-born French officers; of the illness of De Lisle; of the glaring failures in the Commissariat and the Engineers: all with good nature and patience, without either excuse or complaint. Everything that he did was done from policy; he knew neither cruelty nor fear—nor, in these matters, self-interest.

"I hoped," he remarked, "to defeat the Allies again before they had so strengthened themselves, but it was impossible: my front was too scattered, and I never could get enough men together in the right place at the right time."

Hensdorff, to whom the question had been of supreme importance, noted that he had not again asked where the Emperor had been; so little a matter was Leopold in Christian's mind. Nothing of the Emperor's movements concerned him, save that he should be there at the given time, to act his puppet part in Frankfurt.

Then Christian, turning to another matter, spoke words that went through Hensdorff like a cold wind piercing his shrinking flesh. Christian said:

"I have had no news from Ottenheim for some time now; it is these roads, no doubt; the foul weather. And yet, I thought I should have heard by now."

Count Hensdorff repeated, mechanically:

"Your Highness has had no news from Ottenheim?"

"The Duchess," remarked Christian, "has left three or four of my letters unanswered."

Hensdorff wondered whether he was conscious that he had thus betrayed the fact that he did not expect to hear from his wife.

"And Colonel Pons, I should have thought *he* would have written, at least; no doubt he has done so," added Christian,

"but the roads are barbarous, and the posts get mostly delayed."

"I have certainly found travelling difficult," muttered Hensdorff, under his breath. He could not force himself to say anything about Ottenheim; he could not force himself to remain any longer in the room; he felt at once shuddering and stifling, overwhelmed by a sense of having undertaken more than his forces could accomplish.

Christian rang a bell, and, when an officer immediately appeared, told him to discover some fair lodgings for Count Hensdorff. "Not too far from my headquarters, and where there is some comfort; for the Count has been ill," he added, pleasantly.

The old man fumbled with his fur gloves, and seemed to try to speak. What diabolical irony made Christian so kind to him? Never before had he seen such amiable friendliness on that dark, handsome face, which too often was composed to an insolent gravity; never before, either, had he such cause to admire this man.

For he had lately learned something of what he had accomplished, and the stupendous task he had undertaken—a bargain, a sordid bargain, perhaps, and he a mere mercenary whose services had been bought; but in every way he had given of his superb best; in nothing had he shirked or faltered. Had he been the most loyal of paladins, serving a beloved emperor, he could not have done more than he had done for Leopold.

Hensdorff winced and sickened when he considered this, and hesitated, not knowing how to leave this man, not knowing what to do or say—although for days he had striven to prepare for this meeting, to consider and debate how he should conduct himself at this momentous interview.

While he hesitated, despatches were brought in to Christian, who read them, standing, after a courteous gesture towards the minister.

Bad news . . . the Maréchal de Belfort, hard pressed at Saar, had been defeated heavily—even there, on the borders of Lorraine; he was close on the messenger's heels, bringing

up his shattered and exhausted forces to the shelter of Limburg in the valley of the Lahn.

A faint distress marred Christian's serenity. There had been on every side defeat, since the day when he had entered Brussels; he was instantly just to the defeated general, as he had been instantly severe to Fürth and Olivenza.

"Belfort is a good man," he remarked, "but he was not sufficiently reinforced." He glanced at Hensdorff, and added, quietly: "I hope the Emperor will not delay his coming."

Quickly behind the first messenger had come another; Christian gave him instant attention. Hensdorff waited and listened also, in deep, mute anxiety. An agent, employed in the enemy's territory, wished to see the Generalissimo at once.

Christian briefly referred this to General Von Schuckenberg, who had this department in charge; also all the deciphering, the keys of various and possible ciphers.

"I have told you this before," he added.

But the messenger said, with many excuses, that the agent had insisted upon a personal interview with Christian.

"The matter, he declared, is personal to Your Highness."

"How can it possibly be personal to me?" demanded Christian, haughtily.

The door was pushed gently open, and the agent, who had followed the messenger closely behind, softly, daintily, entered the apartment.

Hensdorff saw Gabor.

"I might have known!" he said; and took off his gloves again, and laid down his hat.

Christian also immediately recognized Gabor, but for a second he remained at a loss, so entirely had he forgotten the existence of this man. He had not even been aware that he had been retained in the service of Hensdorff.

Gabor, with his hand in the bosom of his dark dress, smiled from one to the other, and Hensdorff returned that smile with a look of lightning hate.

"Gabor!" exclaimed Christian, frowning; and suddenly, all the circumstances of his last dismissal of this man flew

to his mind. "I will hear nothing you have to say," he remarked, sternly. "Begone at once."

But Hensdorff squared his shoulders, and muttered:

"Let him stay! I must ask Your Highness to allow Ferdinand Gabor to stay."

Christian looked sharply at the speaker, then dismissed the messenger.

"Speak!" he commanded.

THIRTY-THREE

GABOR bowed suavely towards Hensdorff, and asked, with courtly suavity:

"Is it your pleasure, Monseigneur, to remain and hear what I have to say?"

Christian retained his bland composure, but he was slightly puzzled by the demeanour of Hensdorff; also by the sudden appearance of Gabor, a man who by him had been equally detested and forgotten. "Why," he asked himself, "should Hensdorff wish to remain to hear what the Transylvanian spy has to say?"

He asked him so roundly, reminding him that neither of them had time for foolishness; but Hensdorff had resolved upon his part. He had heard from Leopold of the intolerable part Gabor had in this intolerable affair, and he saw that the inevitable moment had come—the moment that he had wished, with all his skill and adroitness, to keep at bay; but which no skill or adroitness had been able to keep at bay, and which now must be faced. That Gabor was implacable, he well knew; that to evade him was impossible he also well knew. And with that courage which he had seldom called upon, but which he had always in reserve, he resolved to face the dreadful moment.

"I know what this man has come to say," he remarked, "and I should wish to stay beside Your Highness while he tells his story."

Gabor shrugged and bowed. The presence of Hensdorff was a slight blot upon his hoarded triumph, yet not a large one.

"It is as Monseigneur pleases," he replied, with the insolence of a lackey.

Christian continued to look sharply from one man to another. An insidious and sinister doubt troubled him as to

the precise nature of the affair between these two men, so unlike and yet evidently now with some bond between them. He regarded them both with an accentuation of his natural haughtiness. It seemed to him as incredible as detestable that it should possibly be in Gabor's power in any way to disturb him. He could not conceive why Hensdorff should wish to wait for this grotesque interview.

Hensdorff put his thin right hand before his old, clouded and unhappy eyes.

"Why," demanded Christian of Gabor, with increasing sternness, "do you not speak?"

And Gabor, with a grin of pride, as one who sees his foe falling before him, asked:

"Has Your Highness heard lately from Ottenheim?"

This name was to Christian perfumed and festooned with a thousand delights, a thousand delicate graces; and he frowned to hear it upon such lips. Interrogating the insolent speaker with his clear, steady and angry eyes, he remained, however, tranquil; and, as Gabor did not immediately reply and seemed to gloat over the moment of suspense, Christian, with a gesture of dandyism that had become almost mechanical with him, flicked invisible dust from his brocaded cuff.

"Your Highness will not have heard from Colonel Pons for several days," remarked Gabor; and Christian asked:

"How do you know that I have not heard from Colonel Pons?"

Hensdorff, staring horribly through his fingers, saw Christian's impressive figure almost imperceptibly straighten as he spoke these words.

"Colonel Pons is dead," announced Gabor.

Hensdorff noticed that Christian had sufficient self-control not to repeat that tremendous word, which is nearly always echoed.

"How should Colonel Pons die?" he demanded.

"I can tell you that," replied Gabor, odiously. "He shot himself. He came down to the guardroom in the garrison a little later than usual one morning; he appeared to be as

usual, but he had no orders to give and no questions to ask. He demanded wine and drank at a gulp. Then he said: 'Blast him to all eternity!' and went away. They found out he shot himself almost immediately, in the park."

Hensdorff closed his hands over his eyes, and felt his trembling fingers cold upon his hot lids. He heard a sigh from Christian, and then Christian's voice.

"To whom did Colonel Pons refer when he said 'Blast him to all eternity'?"

Gabor licked his lips over the exquisite flavor of his triumph.

"Leopold," he answered.

At that name, Hensdorff felt as if choking ashes filled the warm room. He took his hands from his face, and stood up to his moment of supreme humiliation and utter discomfiture. He even inflicted on himself the agony of looking at Christian; but Christian was as yet unchanged. His valour had not yet been pricked, nor his pride breathed upon.

Gabor put his haggard hand into his thin bosom, and appeared to fondle something beneath the folds of his plain, austere cravat.

Christian asked no more questions. He was mute and erect, and quite motionless. Gabor's voice came deliberately.

"You, Monseigneur, may slay me for what I am about to say; and I can be slain, having said it. My life is in your power, but not my silence."

Christian sighed again. It seemed to Hensdorff, in his agony, a most extraordinary thing that he should do so—sigh at this juncture.

Gabor played with the moment: he seemed to fondle it as if it were a cherished child—to caress every one of these seconds, so dreadful to Hensdorff.

"I have been to Ottenheim," he smiled, "where I so long served you, Monseigneur; services that you kindly repaid with a cut across my face. Perhaps you may recall: your memory is good, I think, even for trivialities. I have been to Ottenheim, and I have seen the Princess Eleanora."

The old, trembling voice of Hensdorff cut across his speech.

"You shall not say what you intend to say! Leave it! Leave it!"

But Gabor replied, undauntedly:

"I will say every word that I intended to say. Why should I leave anything?"

And Christian, in an expressionless tone, said:

"Leave nothing."

"I have been sentinel," smiled Gabor, "outside the Princess Eleanora's window, all through one winter night: a dog to watch outside her window, Prince Christian. That window was unlatched: they were so inexperienced! Both of them so inexperienced!"

"*They?*" whispered Christian.

And Gabor replied immediately, as if there was a dart in his voice—so keen and vivid were his words:

"She, Eleanor—and Leopold: together in that room all night. When I broke in upon them, thinking the dawn made such dallying indiscreet, I saw her, Prince Christian, half naked at her dressing table; and he behind her, asleep in her bed . . . your bed, Monseigneur, that you so brightly decked for her."

Christian said, on a sob:

"You blackguard! I will have you flogged to death!"

"Ay, no doubt!" replied Gabor, with unquenchable fury and unflickering hate; "and take these, Monseigneur, as my parting gift—a second time let them be a parting gift."

He brought his hand swiftly from his breast, and held out to Christian the two green diamonds that he had given to Eleanora on his wedding night.

"She gave me these—her bribe for silence. They were lying unregarded, with other trinkets, on her toilet table; her bribe for silence, I say! But she did not offer high enough. No pearls or diamonds, nor gold—ay, nor any gems—could have bought this moment from me, Prince Christian."

Hensdorff cried, with trembling hoarseness:

"For God's sake, have done! Have done! I implore Your Highness to have this wretch dragged out."

"Ay!" Gabor caught it up quickly: "To shout out my news before the camp?"

Christian moved and raised his eyes: his level glance stared down the fury of the man in front of him. He said, in a voice not by one inflexion out of control:

"I marked you deeper than I thought, Gabor; I see the mark of my ring quite plainly across your lip!"

At this, most unexpected, the spy winced back, his malice fluttering on his ashy lips. He had expected death, not this; some fury, tremendous and ungovernable; but never this. . . .

"Back to your gutter, dog!" added Christian. "Back to your filth and garbage . . . and do not dare to come within my sight again. . . ."

The keen edge of Gabor's triumph was blunted. How many times he had rehearsed this moment: but never like this. His keen eyes, vivid with malice, searched in vain the cold face before him for any sign of pain.

"You brave it out, Monseigneur!" he snarled. "But it is done, and cannot be undone; and I was the first to tell you."

He took a stealthy step towards the door.

"Have me touched," he added, in tones shrill with venom, "and I will make her name as stale as that of any commoner of the camp!"

Christian continued to stare him down unflinchingly, without a quiver of his lids or of his lips.

"Go!" muttered Hensdorff, hoarsely: "go! Have you not seen, you blackguard, that you can do nothing more here?"

Gabor had other and even deeper injuries burning upon his lips; but before that unflinching stare, that mute arrogance of Christian, he could not utter them. Even the vigour of his hate was taken aback by the vigour of the other man's pride. But there was time; so he controlled his yet unslaked malice: there was time—other places, other opportunities; much that he might yet do to wound and dismay.

Without a salute to either of the men, and with as much insolence as he could command, he left them.

Hensdorff, giddy with nausea, shaded his eyes again; yet, through his fingers, with horrible furtiveness, watched the other man. Slowly Christian turned his gaze from the door through which Gabor had retreated, and looked down at the two diamonds left lying upon the humble table. These he took up, with unfaltering fingers, and put into his pocket; then rang the bell. Hensdorff waited.

When the aide-de-camp entered, Christian said, in a voice yet level and expressionless:

"A man has just left me: one Gabor—a Transylvanian spy, an agent once employed by me. He is most vile and treacherous: a dangerous man. Follow him, and in some secret place have him swiftly arrested and gagged. Mark you that, Captain de Bernet—have him gagged! See that he does not open his mouth. For it would be only to utter profanities that he would do so. Keep him so, in strict confinement, gagged, until you know my pleasure—at once—to this I hold you answerable, and see I am not interrupted by any one for half an hour or so."

The officer saluted and withdrew.

The first chill of grey dusk had invaded the room; the neglected fire was falling out, Christian sat down and looked slowly at Hensdorff, who remained huddled and motionless in his low seat.

Christian said:

"There is brandy in that cupboard: will you, Count, give me some?" And, as Hensdorff rose in silence, he added: "Is this true?"

Hensdorff, without answering, found the brandy, poured it out and brought the glass to the table.

Christian repeated:

"Is it true?"

Hensdorff replied:

"Drink that, for God's sake!" Then added: "Yes."

"You were there?" asked Christian.

Hensdorff replied:

"I was at Bosenberg: I waited for him. I was there when he came home. There is nothing to be said in the way of extenuation, of excuse."

"She—she . . ." asked Christian, and for the first time his voice faltered. "Was it found out?" he added.

"They were such fools!" replied Hensdorff, with bitter contempt. "Yes, it was found out. And that old woman, the Duchess of Schönbuchel, told her what she was . . . she spared her nothing."

"And Pons shot himself," said Christian. "She was not worth it—eh, Hensdorff?"

"Pons was cut to the heart that he had been outwitted, and his trust betrayed; but it was not his fault; it was an act of the most foul treachery!"

Christian raised the glass of brandy, but set it down again.

"Oh, Hensdorff," he murmured, "I feel sick—a sudden and utter sickness. Never in my life before such weakness. . . . O God, what shall I do if I should not be able to command myself?"

"I did what I could," answered the minister, in the extreme of bitter distress; "I hastened after him, for I guessed; I tried to save her for you, but I was too late."

"In my room—my house—my bed!" breathed Christian, as if he had not heard these words. "Why, I am ill! It is as if the sudden blow had struck all my senses! And that dog to see her, as he said he saw her. . . ."

"Have him strangled," said Hensdorff, "and thrown into a ditch. . . ."

"Where is she now?" asked Christian, heedless of this.

"At Ottenheim," replied Hensdorff.

"What title has she now?" asked Christian, with a terrible smile. "What shall I call her? His harlot and my wife."

Hensdorff said, heavily:

"Everything is in your hands; without you he has no crown, no army, no chance."

"You remind me of that?"

"You must when you come to think—and now you cannot think—discover it for yourself," replied Hensdorff with

dignity. "I do not disguise from you, Monseigneur, that you could betray him as he has betrayed you."

"No," breathed Christian, "for he has no wife, and a crown is but a particle of dust on a scale so weighed against me."

Hensdorff walked up and down the small, mean room, which every moment was getting colder and darker.

"I thought," he said, labouring painfully with his words, "I thought, in my weakness and my folly, to keep this from Your Highness for a while, till matters were less critical . . . thinking of everything involved—so many men, so many fortunes—a cause which was, once at least, a worthy cause, I felt myself justified in keeping this from Your Highness until the issue of the campaign had been decided. But that scoundrel pushed his point; and now, I cannot persuade, I cannot hope."

Christian raised his hand and made a slight gesture, as if he brushed aside a cloud of irritating words—as if these elaborate sentences were no more to him than that.

"Do you think," he asked, "that she was forced?"

Hensdorff replied, bitterly:

"No. But all the blame lies with him." He paused before Christian, and added, desperately: "I hope Your Highness holds me guiltless in this matter; if you did not, I should be forced to destroy myself, even as Colonel Pons destroyed himself."

"I believe," muttered Christian, dully, "that you are a man of honour."

"Honour!" repeated Hensdorff, in broken tones; "I know not how honour enters into any of this affair. I had struck him down with my own hand before I had been a party to this!"

The immobility and silence of Christian were appalling to Hensdorff. He added, in broken tones, with the frenzy of a man who hastens a dreaded climax:

"And now, what will Your Highness do? What shall we any of us do?"

Christian gave him an awful smile.

"Do you think this pierces me?" he asked. "Do you not think that I am still invincible?"

"But what will you do?" cried Hensdorff.

Christian put his hand into his pocket. Hensdorff noticed with horror that at last his firm fingers were shaking.

"No," he said, "don't! Don't look at them! Don't touch them or think of them!"

But Christian had brought the two diamonds out, and laid them on the table.

"Could she not have given him anything else?" he whispered "Anything else but these! Half naked at her table, he said, gazing at her rifled charms: an accomplished wanton so soon—eh, Hensdorff? How they learn it! And I had thought her so immaculate!—so before my possible profaning. Mitau this was called, my Kurland capital . . ."

"Let be!" urged Hensdorff, hoarsely; "let be! It is beyond reflexion! Root her out of your mind! You can be rid of her!"

"I am in a void," said Christian, gazing at the green lustre of the stones and as if speaking to himself. "Nothing appears to exist any longer . . . was it possible that I lived in a world so self-created?"

A sound of distant trumpets broke the stillness of the gathering night. Christian listened.

"Belfort, and his ragged remnants," he murmured. "There was to have been a council to-night. I have a press of business; much to do."

"You had," replied Hensdorff; "but now . . ."

Christian pushed aside the glass of brandy with a gesture of disgust.

"I am certainly ill," he said; "but I must command myself . . . that would be a pitiful thing, would it not, Count, if I could not command myself?"

"Will you," asked Hensdorff, fearfully, "leave us all to destruction?"

"Destruction?" repeated Christian, faintly. "It is I who am destroyed."

"He who is captain of himself," said Hensdorff, "is never

vanquished. . . . I would ask no pity: only this: if you would tell me what you mean to do?"

Christian put his hand to his forehead, as if he endeavoured to ease an intolerable pain.

"What," he asked, "do you think that I shall do?"

"God help us," responded the older man, sullenly; "I think you will deliver us all to the enemy."

Christian did not answer. Thick, grey darkness had fallen over the room. They could hardly distinguish each other's faces. From the window the lights of the town began to show in small crescents of brightness.

"I must," came Christian's voice out of this increasing inner gloom, "I must have some time to myself. Come to me again in the morning."

Hensdorff could say no more; he also was utterly fatigued. He would have wept, had he not been old and tears too difficult. He made his way feebly to the door; and there, he did pause and say:

"If you leave him, I will follow you."

As he spoke, he peered back into the twilit darkness; and he could just discern Christian's brilliant figure bent low over the table, his face in his hands; and, for fear that the soldier wept, Hensdorff left the room hastily, closing the door behind him.

Distant and conflicting strains of music travelled the heavy winter air; and, high above the low brown fog and mist, sparkled a few pallid stars. Long practice enabled Hensdorff to assume the appearance of his accustomed fortitude. He found his servant waiting for him among the pavilions. The fellow told him that he had secured lodgings in the inn.

As Hensdorff made his way there, he passed Belfort's weary cavalry, coming in gloomily and dispiritedly from their defeat.

He could not bring himself to visit De Lisle, or any of the other generals. He felt that everything, their very existence, was in Christian's hands, and that he himself, by not so much as a raised finger, could do anything to influence Christian . . . or would have done so if he could.

He waited, therefore, in his alien lodgings; shaken to the heart—an old and shattered man. As the hours went by, he heard no news, and no one came to wait upon him. Only, he could distinguish through the confused noises of the night the tramp of soldiers entering the town; music, and shouting, and the lamentations. . . .

At length, unable any longer to endure the suspense, he sent his servant to Prince Christian's headquarters to ask . . . anything . . . news . . . what the Generalissimo did . . . if he held his council . . . any scrap of information that might be available.

After an hour or so, the man returned. There was no council to be held to-night, though all the generals had gathered at headquarters, including Belfort, with his tale of disaster.

Christian was ill: he had been stricken down by some fit, or seizure. He lay now, half unconscious, attended by doctors and surgeons. Every one was lost, distracted, filled by a sense of unutterable misfortune. No one, added the messenger, could guess the cause of the Generalissimo's sudden illness, for hitherto he had shown an unconquerable health, never being affected by the maladies and discomforts that prostrated so many of the others.

"He has not," murmured Count Hensdorff, "sent for me?"

But the man said no, Prince Christian had sent for no one. The doctors described him as lying with locked lips. It was whispered among his *entourage* that once, when he had been left alone for a moment, he had risen and beaten his head against the wall, as if he desired to dash out his brains, and only been restrained by the instant reappearance of the doctors.

They had bled him twice, but had been unable to induce him to swallow any medicine.

Count Hensdorff groaned. He thought of Leopold as a murderer: a cowardly murderer who stabbed in the back and in the dark. He would have liked to enquire about the fate of Ferdinand Gabor, but dared not do so for fear of attracting attention to the Transylvanian and possibly con-

necting his interview with the collapse of Christian. He hoped that the Transylvanian was safely secured somewhere—gagged and bound in the dark; but even if this were so, he knew that he was not suffering so acutely as the man whom he had just struck down. And most passionately did Hensdorff hope that Gabor would never come to learn of the swift success of his atrocious deed.

The minister could not eat or rest or sleep. Continuously, throughout the night, he sent for news of Christian; and when the news came it was always the same: Christian lay on the farmhouse bed, deprived of all his senses, while his staff and his subordinates came and went, and gossiped and chattered and speculated and wondered; and in everything they did and said, expressed an infinite dismay. They were all like men delivered to the enemy, for news had come that the Allies were advancing, now strong enough not to need to wait, but to be able to offer battle in their turn.

Hensdorff asked if he could see Christian, but the doctors refused to allow him into the small, ill-ventilated chamber. The next dawn came, and the next noonday, and there was no change. The surgeons spoke of some unimaginable shock, and whispered that surely Prince Christian would lose either his life or his reason. Cavalry patrols reached the little town to say that the Emperor was only a few hours away. Half the generals said that if he was to take Prince Christian's place as actual Commander-in-Chief of the forces they would not fight: so accurately did they value his incapacity, his indecision and his lack of experience.

The evening of that same day, Hensdorff, agonizing in his wretched inn, was sent for by Prince Christian.

"His Highness is conscious, and requests your immediate attendance," the anxious and amazed messenger said.

Hensdorff set out trembling, not knowing if he was going to meet a dying man.

THIRTY-FOUR

HENSDORFF moved wearily through streets crowded with soldiery, one interlaced confusion and entwined clamour after another in the progress of the old, fatigued man.

It had been raining heavily through all the long winter day, and everything was befouled with mire. When Hensdorff saw the twin standards of Kurland and Hapsburg still above the farm where Christian lay, he felt an odd pang of secret amaze. These flags did not flaunt boldly now, but hung limply in the heavy air, wet, to the poles. All the outbuildings and the pavilions overflowed with a press of people; Hensdorff caught sullen and indignant murmurs: the complaints of those surprised by the heavy hand of fate. Maréchal De Lisle himself, haggard and exhausted from continuous fever, had dragged himself here, but without result; he and all others had had to return without news. But the doctor, who met Hensdorff in the little, overcrowded kitchen, said that Christian had partly recovered, and wished to speak to him, Count Hensdorff, and to no other.

The old man bowed silently: he believed that Christian had come to a decision, and he could scarcely doubt what that decision would be. Certainly he could not, if it was what he thought it would be, question it.

With reluctant valiancy he mounted to Christian's room, which was in the front of the house and overlooking the little courtyard now filled with the pavilions: the best chamber of the modest country mansion. The cumbrous furniture had been removed, and replaced by Christian's camp equipment.

The room was lit by a candle, shaded by a pile of books that stood on a side table. Christian lay on an iron bedstead drawn near the stove. Heaped negligently on a chair

were the splendours which he had worn when Hensdorff had last seen him—the field-marshal's uniform, all the bravery of collars and stars, the glitter of The Golden Fleece and the sumptuously hilted sword.

He was slightly propped up in his bed, a carelessly folded military cloak serving as a pillow.

Hensdorff, forced to approach and look at him, was thankful for the obscurity of the half light. Christian had changed now. . . . Gabor would not have been disappointed in his work if he could have seen him as he was now, lying against that rough cloak and staring up at Hensdorff. He had lost entirely that smooth look of buoyant and untroubled youth, and seemed a man of middle age. He was unshaven, and this emphasized both his Southern darkness and his extreme bloodlessness. Even his lips were without colour. He lay in a slack attitude of exhaustion. Both his arms were bandaged where he had been bled. Over his disarranged shirt was flung a white, quilted bedgown.

He motioned to Hensdorff to approach him more closely, and when the minister did so, he said, in a low, hoarse whisper:

"I have not been well."

"It was a blow," replied Hensdorff, looking away, "before which any man might go down. I am thankful, Monseigneur, that you have made some recovery."

"I think I have been dead for many hours," said Christian, curiously, "and visited purgatory and hell. It is strange," he added, faintly, "to have returned."

Hensdorff was at a loss as to how to conduct his speech. He did not know even if the man lying in front of him was in full possession of his senses. He was tormented by a most poignant pity, and a most acrid remorse.

Christian raised himself on one elbow, and peered round the room, which was so dim and so full of fleeting shadows. Hensdorff was doubtful if he recalled his own tragedy: but Christian's next words proved that this doubt was wrong.

"They have brought me down at last, Hensdorff!" he said. "I have become their quarry in the end! They've

hunted me finely all my life, have they not? And now they've got me by the throat—got me down, eh?"

It had not occurred to Hensdorff that what had happened to him would present itself to him in this light; but now he could understand that it would do so, and Christian added, in the same quiet tone:

"He would never have dared to do it, Count, had my mother not been what he has now made her."

Michael Hensdorff dared to say:

"I do not credit he thought of that."

Christian did not reply to this, but muttered:

"There seems to be a great deal of noise in the town—all day I have heard nothing but noise, and people coming and going."

"They are in a confusion," admitted Hensdorff, sadly. "They wait for you: even De Lisle has dragged himself from his bed to see if you will take matters up again. We are all in your hands."

"So many looking to me?" murmured Christian, faintly. "That's odd, isn't it, Count—odd indeed, looking to me, who could not save the one thing I wanted for myself."

"Why did you send for me?" asked the old man, heavily, braced to meet the most terrible of news, the most dire of disasters.

"There is no one else who knows," replied Christian, simply.

And then Hensdorff whispered:

"What have you done with him?"

"What was his part in it?" asked Christian. "I've wondered."

"I do not know—Leopold will not speak. I believe the Transylvanian engineered evil from the first."

Christian asked softly:

"Was his story true, in that he found her—in that he discovered them as he said? Was that true—that she gave him those diamonds: do you know if that is true? Or did he come by them through other means?"

And Hensdorff answered:

"I believe, from what Leopold said, that it is true."

"Then," said Christian, "he must never speak again. Yet what is he to my concern? I did not bring you here to speak of him."

Christian now sat up in bed, and stretched himself with something of his accustomed vigour.

"See, Count Hensdorff," he said, "I have been sick, but now I am recovered. One can, it seems, endure much unutterable torment, and yet live. The air is heavy: will you not open one of the windows?"

"It rains," said Hensdorff, "and the night wind is rising."

"Still," insisted Christian, "open one of the windows."

Hensdorff obeyed, pulling back the modest serge curtains and opening the humble casement. The night air, cold and damp, that surged in guttered the guarded candle, and Hensdorff snuffed it mechanically.

"When does your Emperor arrive at Limburg?" asked Christian.

And Hensdorff, without looking at him, as if absorbed in the candle-snuffing, replied:

"I have had his patrols to-day. He should be here to-morrow."

"Will he review the troops?" asked Christian. And Hensdorff said:

"Is it your wish that he should review the troops?"

And Christian replied:

"Let him come to the parade-ground at the appointed time."

Hensdorff, forced by his own fears to demand the question he dared not ask, said, in shivering accents:

"What is your decision?"

"Let no one ask me my decision," replied Christian, "nor speak to me of my affairs. Love and hate each has a captain—honour leads them both." He propped his dark face in his hands, and added: "Why does your Emperor come? By what inducements have you brought him here?"

"He is led by his usual reason—fear!" said Hensdorff,

scornfully. "He is afraid to stay away. He does not think you know."

"Leave him," smiled Christian, faintly, "in that ignorance. And Pons is dead! I lost a faithful servant there. . . . And yet, I do not think he loved me, Hensdorff."

Hensdorff had not thought so either. He recalled the pompous little soldier, with the bright, bulging blue eyes, the purple cheeks and crescent-shaped mouth, who had often grumbled at his master—even mocked at him; made complaints of his service, and yet, when he had failed him, had taken his own life with no hesitation.

"One thing other I wish to ask you," continued Christian's low, soft voice: "Where is the Duchess?"

"She has left Ottenheim," replied Hensdorff, with difficulty. "She left it the day of my departure. She has returned to Dürsheim."

"I thought so," said Christian; "and her reason?"

"She said," continued Hensdorff, "that there was no longer any occasion for her presence at Ottenheim. The motive of her staying there was gone."

"She has," said Christian, "nothing left to guard." Then he added, faintly: "The—the other woman must feel very lonely." And as he said this he smiled in a fashion that Hensdorff could scarcely endure to behold.

"Worse than lonely, I think," he ventured; "it is, after all, but a child."

Christian interrupted him with breathless haste:

"If I am to keep my senses I must not hear that name. . . ."

Hensdorff remarked, abruptly:

"The Allies advance. They are not so many leagues from Limburg, and we totally unprepared."

"They would make a good bargain with me," whispered Christian, "for betraying the lot of you into their hands, and I should be well paid, even if they gave me nothing—eh, Hensdorff?"

"I cannot," murmured the old man, "remind you of a

promise he has so foully broken; nor of the many dependent on your word and trusting in your fidelity."

"Remind me of nothing!" replied Christian. "I have never framed my actions from the words of other men. Give me till to-morrow morning; then meet me with your Emperor on the parade-ground. To-morrow there is a council meeting, at eight o'clock. I do not require your presence there."

"We are helpless," said Hensdorff. "He and I and all of us who rely on you—helpless."

"Helpless!" echoed Christian; "all of us, helpless, Count: in the hands of the gods."

Hensdorff shrugged his bent and weary shoulders.

"The gods are dead, I think," he answered, scornfully.

"But fame remains," whispered Christian. "I read that somewhere: 'The gods must die, but fame and honour,' Count, 'remain.' " He moved restlessly on his narrow bed. "They must give me something to keep me awake to-night. I would not dream again as I have dreamt these last few hours; or be where I have been, if dream it was not. A sick man's fancies, Count, are odious things. A thousand swarming devils have been within these walls—and all mocked at me."

"But," protested Hensdorff, "mocked, Monseigneur, is not the word!"

"Ay, they mocked at me!" repeated Christian, "saying again and again, an endless chorus, Count, 'Fool! fool! who for that pretty piece staked everything—won her and put her aside with such nicety, leaving her for another.' "

The night wind stirred through the room in a long gusty sigh. The sound of trumpets came from the dark distance; clangour and shout and murmur mingled with that music.

"De Lisle is very broken," remarked Hensdorff. "He means, if Your Highness does not recover, to make some stand himself for the glory of France—though knowing it will be hopeless enough."

"I am sorry for De Lisle," replied Christian, simply. "He does his duty."

"And you'll do yours, no doubt, Monseigneur," replied Hensdorff. "May I ask what it will be?"

"That word," said Christian, "bears no double interpretation. Duty has but one meaning, Count."

Hensdorff was troubled both by these words and by the tone in which they were spoken.

"Is it possible," he asked, with a sort of passionate curiosity, "is it possible that Your Highness would have the strength to go on—to carry out your part?"

"Strength has a mocking sound to me," smiled Christian, mournfully; "you see before you, Count Hensdorff, a weak and feeble man. Never will you again behold one so utterly defeated as I."

"Nay," said Hensdorff, "one, I think, so unconquerable."

Christian did not answer this, though the faintest look of irony passed over his colourless face.

"Tell them to come in to me," he said; "and meet me to-morrow at ten o'clock on the parade ground, Count Hensdorff: the Champ de Mars, which is outside the town, before the woods—that is the rendezvous that I have chosen."

"He means to play us all false," thought Hensdorff, wearily; "and who can call him wrong for that?"

"Faugh!" cried Christian, suddenly, "this air is stale and stifling. Set open the other window, Count, before you go. . . ."

Hensdorff did as he was asked, feeling within himself a certain relief from the sudden inrush of the rain and wind; even a sudden relief in the hearing of the noises from without—normal, human noises, that bespoke life flowing on even past this tragedy; life continuing, even after these events.

He heard Christian speaking, in a voice that was nearly at its usual level of serenity:

"Whatever happens, Count—remember I bear you no ill will. . . ."

Hensdorff turned, and with pain and apprehension looked at him, where he sat leaning forward in his bed, propping

his face upon his hands, with the long, dark hair, in which the neglected pomade and powder still clung, hanging down his shoulders.

"Gabor would be gluttoned," thought the old man, furiously, "if he could see him now!"

"Good night," said Christian; and Hensdorff replied, gravely:

"I wish Your Highness a good night," and left him, pausing in the antechamber to do as he had been asked to do: to send his people in to him; but to all their importunate questions as to the mood, manner and intention of their master, he would answer nothing.

As he crossed the courtyard, he had the curiosity to look up at the two flags waving from the wet roof; he wondered if Christian realized that they both still hung there—and how long one of them would remain when he had once gone abroad and observed them again.

Hensdorff returned wearily to his inn, as he had come from it—wearily. The hostelry was now crowded with French officers; Hensdorff avoided all of them, and in his humble room found at last the sleep of fatigue—almost the sleep of exhausted despair.

He was roused when it was full daylight, by his secretary coming to his bedside and saying that the Emperor had arrived; and with that name, the whole sick train of horrible events came back to the old man's mind and unnerved him. He felt, for one dreadful second, that he could not face Leopold—not after having seen Christian yesterday. . . . And he was debating and struggling with himself while the secretary delivered his message, which was a summons from Leopold, who had taken up a hasty residence in the evacuated Town Hall.

"Is he well?" asked Hensdorff, dully; and the secretary replied that His Majesty appeared to be very well, though he had, in his haste and pressure to arrive at the headquarters, been riding through most of the night, first in a coach and then on horseback.

"I wish," muttered Hensdorff, inaudibly, "that he had ridden to the devil."

But he rose, put on his sober habit, and, accompanied by his secretary and the messenger from Leopold, went to the Town Hall, above which the Hapsburg flag had been raised at a flaunting height.

Leopold received him in a hastily adjusted apartment. The Emperor was wearing his travelling clothes, but two valets were already setting out his uniform upon the chair.

"I was received by De Lisle," he began, at once, in nervous tones, "who told me I am to review the troops at ten o'clock. Prince Christian was not there."

"He told me," said Hensdorff, carefully, "that he would be on the parade ground."

Leopold began.

"Is he . . . has he . . ."

He glanced at the valets, and the words faltered and failed upon his lips.

"Your Majesty must ask me nothing," said Hensdorff.

"Well, I have come!" cried Leopold, petulantly. "You asked me to come—you forced me to come—and now you do not seem pleased when I am here. Good God! how intolerable is my position! How even more bitter do you make it!"

"We are none of us," smiled Hensdorff, sourly, "so comfortable that Your Majesty need envy us."

With difficulty he brought himself to look at Leopold, as yesterday he had with difficulty brought himself to look at Christian. Never again could he regard either of these men with equanimity.

Leopold appeared agitated almost beyond concealment. His bloom was gone, and his dark eyes looked dim and faded, the blue brightness faded. He was so perpetually biting his already full under lip that it had become permanently swollen, and gave a fantastic look to his face, on which his natural melancholy was most grievously accentuated.

"De Lisle is a sick man!" he exclaimed, hurriedly, "and

I hear that the enemy mean to attack us. Everything appears in confusion: what has happened?"

"Sire," replied Hensdorff, stiffly, "I have asked you to demand nothing of me, for my lips are sealed."

Leopold nervously pressed his handkerchief to his marred mouth.

"De Lisle told me," he said, and his voice choked and stifled in his throat, "that Prince Christian had been ill, also—"

"He had a fit or seizure," replied Hensdorff, coldly; "but he is something recovered. I saw him yesterday, and he seemed in full command of himself. I think Your Majesty will find him on the parade ground to-day." But in his heart, Hensdorff did not believe his own words. He did not conceive that Christian could possibly be on that parade ground by ten o'clock, with the strength to face the Emperor. Such a feat of self-domination seemed to him impossible. He would not have been amazed if he had learnt that Christian had ridden over to the Allied camp during the night; or, on the other hand, that he was again too ill to leave his bed. And, thinking of the suffering of Christian, Hensdorff looked most bitterly at the young man before him, in no way softened by the obvious fact that Leopold had suffered also.

"Why do you stare at me?" cried Leopold, nervously. "You made me come—well, I am here."

"God give the day a good ending!" murmured Hensdorff.

Leopold drew him into the window-place, where they were out of sight and of earshot of the valets.

"Does he know?" he whispered, breathlessly.

And Hensdorff replied with an abrupt evasion.

"Would it be likely that he would be here if he knew?" he answered. "Would it be possible for him to meet you to-day on the parade ground?"

And, with a trembling sigh, half of relief and half of fear, Leopold replied:

"No; it would not be possible. But this illness?"

"Has he not permission to be ill, like other men?" re-

plied Hensdorff, gruffly. "He has had much work to do, and little support." And he added, not being, indeed, able to bear further converse on the matter: "We will meet, Sire, after the review."

He left the Emperor, and took his little hired carriage to the parade ground outside the town.

There was no longer any rain, and most of the heavy clouds had blown away; but the sun looked old and sullen in a sky that was bleak for all its faint blue.

"He will not be there!" muttered Hensdorff, to himself. "No; it is not possible that he will be there. And, God in Heaven! what are we going to do?" And he added to himself: "If I were a younger man, I would ride after him wherever he had gone."

When he arrived at the plain where the troops were to be reviewed, he found masses of soldiery already in place, although it was not more than half past nine. Most of the French were there, and De Lisle was present, in a light basket carriage; Hensdorff took up his place beside him.

Neither of them mentioned Christian, but talked indifferently of the lesser events of the moment.

Leopold and his escort arrived, for once, more than punctually, and he took up his place with the Electors, Princes and Generals under a group of gaunt trees that fringed a large pool, where the rain lingered in sullen, stagnant greyness. Bedizened and beplumed, Leopold made no such ill figure. It seemed scarcely credible to Hensdorff that this was the man who had staggered into Bosenberg, that dreadful night not so many nights ago.

Leopold turned this way and that, with great animation, talking quickly with false gaiety; his affability had now become mechanical, and almost exercised without his own volition.

"Christian will not come," Hensdorff kept saying to himself in a light refrain. "And then what will he do? What will any of us do?"

"It is the first time," smiled De Lisle, regretfully, "that I have been at a review and not on horseback."

"I fear, Monseigneur," replied Hensdorff, "that we are both old men. . . ."

"I certainly begin to feel," responded De Lisle, "that this is a barbarous fashion in which to pass the winter! I wish you would get, my dear Count, your Emperor firmly fixed upon his throne, so that I could return to Paris."

The troops poured into the open field, square after square, battalion after battalion, regiment after regiment.

"By now," mused Hensdorff, "I suppose he is at the Allies' headquarters, with all our plans in his hands. They will give him, no doubt, a very splendid welcome." Devoid of hope, and almost of emotion, he gazed dully at the monotonous pageant before him; the sky began to cloud over, and the gloomy sun was veiled by yet gloomier vapours; he heard an officer behind them comment: "Prince Christian is late."

But De Lisle answered:

"No; he is never late. You will find he is here, punctually to the moment."

"No doubt," thought Hensdorff, ironically, "he will be punctual to another appointment. . . ." And he wished, now, that he had had the courage, before coming to the parade ground, to go to Christian's headquarters and discover if he was yet there. But he had purposely avoided this, and winced from hearing any news whatever of the movements of Christian; nor had any one mentioned anything to him. Whatever the Generalissimo had done, it must have been done privately; for no one seemed to have a breath of suspicion of what was likely to happen.

The squat church of the little town chimed the thin, melancholy tune of an old Lutheran hymn, and then struck ten.

"Here," exclaimed De Lisle, with satisfaction, "he is: punctual to the moment, as I said."

Startled, Hensdorff leapt from his carriage and gazed across the parade ground. A sparkling and glittering cavalcade was sweeping into the field. It was Christian and his Uhlans; punctual to the second.

He rode directly up to the Emperor, and, with a profound salute, took his place beside him. He was near enough for Hensdorff to observe him closely. He bore no trace of his illness or collapse, but had achieved again his precise and accurate splendour. Shaved, powdered, adorned with all his adornments, he sat his great white horse, immovable and unmoved by any emotion whatsoever, as far as Hensdorff could observe. The Golden Fleece which sparkled, even in this dull winter light, lay on a tranquil bosom. He wore the uniform of Austria and carried the baton with the Imperial Eagle.

Hensdorff observed Leopold glance at him wildly, and laugh nervously at some insipid jest that one of the officers behind him uttered. Fascinated, Hensdorff continued to peer and stare at Christian, whose dark countenance, as ever composed and serene, gave no indication of two days' agony—of an ever-present, continuous and atrocious agony which he must be enduring now. He even smiled, and his glance travelled over Leopold with a complete steadiness.

"Will he," trembled Hensdorff, "defy him to his face?"

At this moment, Christian observed De Lisle, and saluted him profoundly, bowing low from his saddle.

Then he rode to the head of his Uhlans, who had halted a few paces from the Emperor, and drew his sword and held it for a second aloft. It seemed to Hensdorff that he bore the Imperial Diadem at the point of that same sword; and, as he flourished his weapon, he cried, in a voice that was heard and echoed by thousands of throats:

"Long live the Emperor! Long live the Emperor!"

THIRTY-FIVE

AS the Imperial cavalcade left the parade ground, Leopold was forced to motion to Christian to come alongside his horse. He should have thanked him for the appearance and efficiency of the troops, and passed some formal compliments; but he was quite incapable of doing this. Then he asked:

"Do we march at once, Prince?"

Christian replied, without looking at him:

"Limburg is an open and an undefended town. I intend to march at once, and meet the enemy before he marches to meet me."

"The season is rigorous," replied Leopold, mechanically, "and many officers have declared aversion to a sudden movement—indeed, to any further action this winter."

"Despite that," said Christian, "I shall advance."

He turned slightly in his saddle and stared at Leopold. At that look, Leopold blenched and started, so that his nervous horse curvetted out of the line of march. "Before we leave Limburg," added Christian, "there is a detail to which I would beg the attention of Your Majesty." Then he asked, in an indifferent voice: "Has Your Majesty convoked the Diet for Frankfurt?"

And Leopold said:

"Yes—for the first of February." And nervously he continued to speak of the progress of the war, and politics; saying that four thousand troops were coming up from Italy to help Christian; and that they were old and able soldiers. He also said that he could spare more men from Hungary, where for the moment the Turkish campaign languished.

"I have," replied Christian, "sufficient men for the service I have undertaken."

And Leopold was uneasily silent.

The vanguard, and the greater part of the French troops, were now marching out of the town; but Christian desired the Emperor to turn aside with him into a field outside the walls; and Leopold dared not refuse.

"There is," remarked Christian, "something to be done; and I wish Your Majesty to see it done."

They had with them an escort of Uhlans and Dragoons, and when they reached the flat, damp, bleak and barren winter field they found a small troop of Croatians there, who held in the midst a prisoner in civilian clothes. His arms were bound, and he was guarded by four musketeers.

"This is a traitor who has been brought here to die," said Christian.

"Why must I behold him die?" cried Leopold, shuddering to his heart.

"I think Your Majesty knows the man," replied Christian, serenely; "and it is well that you should see the end to which he comes . . ."

Leopold stared with horror at the prisoner. He did not immediately recognize that tall, spare figure in the black attire without peruke or hat, which might have been that of a tutor, a scholar or even a Lutheran parson. The lower part of this man's face was tightly bandaged, and there was little visible of his countenance but his vivid and menacing eyes beneath a creased and lowering forehead.

"Is he wounded?" breathed the Emperor, biting his lip.

Christian replied:

"He is gagged."

Leopold knew the prisoner now: it was Gabor, the Transylvanian spy, whom he had last seen in that fell moment in that bitter dawn in Eleanora's bedchamber; that slim and sinister figure with the tongue of gall!

"What has he done?" whispered Leopold, in lively horror; and even the presence of his escort could scarcely restrain him from open betrayal of himself . . . but Christian answered so calmly that he was reassured, and in his throb of relief contrived to command his jangling nerves.

"The man is a traitor," said General Crack without passion. "He has betrayed his trust; a spy, who strove to serve both sides, Sire—yet served nothing but his own malice."

"Why is he gagged?" demanded Leopold.

"He is gagged because his last words were so foul that he shall have no opportunity to repeat them."

Leopold was bewildered with terror. In his chill heart he thought: "Gabor has betrayed us, Gabor has sold us, Christian knows!" Yet, immediately on this, came the other reflection: "How could I live, if he knew? No, it is impossible! Gabor has been discovered in some other treachery, and so, when they kill him, we shall be safe." And yet he could not endure to watch this sordid execution.

"Must I stay?" he asked Christian. "What importance is there in this punishment of a spy and traitor?"

"Ferdinand Gabor was of some distinction," responded Christian, "and once in my employment."

As he spoke, he made a signal to the officer who was in charge of the Croats, and the prisoner was led by the musketeers across the russet fallows of field and down to one of the bare winter trees that had straggled from a dark little wood that coloured the close horizon; a pine tree that yet bore some dark and funereal plumes of foliage.

"Will you not allow him a priest?" asked Leopold.

"He shall not open his lips this side Hell," replied Christian. "When the gag falls out of his mouth it will be because his face has rotted behind it—"

As Gabor had been led past the little group of horsemen, Christian had turned to the Emperor and spoken to him with deference and affability, smiling upon him as if he delighted in his company, and was eager for his praise. This would be the last sight Gabor saw—these two gorgeous horsemen, in amiable converse. . . . Christian knew that this would be a harder punishment even than his infamous death; for he would see that he had failed in his choice and careful scheme of vindictive revenge; Christian's

pride, not his hate would have proved the more mighty passion.

But Leopold was confused with fright and apprehension; although the death of Gabor was wholly in his interest, and, to his thinking, a most fortunate coincidence, still he could not endure to witness the execution: to see the bound, gagged man, with those vivid, ferocious and sparkling eyes threatening all malice and contempt, dragged past and bound to the bare tree . . . lashed there with brutal swiftness.

The file of musketeers took up their position. Leopold turned away his head; he was hardly able to hold his reins. He sensed that there was something terrible in his being brought to witness this horror; and yet always there was the ghastly comfort that Christian could not know! If he knew, then he, Leopold, the Emperor, would not be there, alive . . . had not this man acclaimed him, an hour before on the parade ground?

He heard the rattle of shots, and the bullets seemed to come near his own stifling heart. . . . He dared to look round with dreadful apprehension, and saw the smoke clearing away from the sodden earth, and the dark, hard twisted outline of the tree, and the dark, slim figure hanging limply in the bonds.

The musketeers proceeded to dig a grave at the edge of the field and bury the traitor where he had fallen.

"Now we can go," said Christian. "They will bury him with the gag still in his mouth."

"What could he have said that you so fear?" whispered Leopold, staring across the field at the huddled shape of the dead man.

"Nothing that I fear," replied Christian; "but there are some words which must be the last that any man can say. And he, Sire, spoke them—so he purges himself of a gross treachery that could no other way be cancelled."

The Emperor turned his restive horse. He should have been pleased, gratified, relieved; this meant safety for her and him. Gabor was silenced: who else was there to speak?

Many in Ottenheim and Bosenberg knew, such inexperienced fools had they been! Still, now Gabor was dead, there was no one who would speak. Yet he could not feel reassured by this death that he had been forced to witness, but was only further enmeshed in a deeper doubt and a more sombre horror.

As they cantered away from the hoar field side by side, Christian remarked:

"Has Your Majesty heard that Colonel Pons is dead?"

And Leopold, lying in fear, replied:

"No, Prince, I had not heard!"

"He was found in my park at Ottenheim," said Christian. "An accident, no doubt: I am sorry for it—he was a good and a faithful soldier."

"I, too, am sorry," said Leopold, under his breath; and he wondered, in agony, how Christian had heard that news. If he was aware of the death of Colonel Pons, he must be aware of some other events that had taken place at Ottenheim . . . but Leopold dared say nothing more, nor in any way to put his fate to the touch. Still, like a refrain, beat in his tormented mind: "It is impossible that he should know! It is impossible that he should know!" And the sound fell into the monotonous rhythm of his horse's hoofs as he galloped beside Christian through the foul streets of Limburg.

The gloomy clouds covered the sun, which was to be seen no more that day; and a little icy rain fell, which soon turned into snow. Despite this inclemency and the murmurs of many of the princes and generals, Christian pressed forward with his entire force towards the encampment of the Allies.

The Marquis of Baden had come up with some fresh troops. Even with these welcome reinforcements, Christian knew himself greatly inferior to the enemy, who also had this immense advantage, that, superior in cavalry, they had been able to forage the country for leagues around, and secure all the available provisions; whereas the Imperialists

were daily more short of food, and had been four days on limited rations.

By midday Christian received news that the enemy were but two leagues away, and that they had passed the river Lahn on pontoons with a large corps of Hanoverians; and lower down, by other bridges, a considerable number of infantry had left their encampment and were prepared to oppose the progress of the Imperialists.

Christian had hoped to reach the river before the enemy passed it, and, had it not been for his illness, would have done so. He had now to make good what was to him this great disadvantage.

At this disconcerting intelligence several of the generals showed open discontent, and murmured that they had been led into a trap. "We are lost," cried one, "without the drawing of a sword."

"The sword is not drawn yet," Christian reminded them.

He halted, and sent out scouts to reconnoitre the position, himself riding over much of the ground, which here rose to gentle hillocks encompassing the valley and gave through the glasses a fair survey of the enemy.

He then disposed his troops, sending the regiments of Baden and Pomerania ahead to hold the banks of the river against the further crossing of the Allies, and arranged an attack in concert with the other generals, many of whom, however, did not wish an engagement; several of them had already abandoned the march, and were sending their baggage wagons and their artillery to a place of safety. Christian, riding beside the Emperor, who was wrapped in his cloak against the snow, and silent in moody gloom, asked ironically:

"As you cannot escape, why not fight? Laurel or cypress for us to-day, gentlemen! Triumph or the tomb! To conquer or to die! The usual soldier's choice, I think."

"We are hopelessly outnumbered," protested Knittelfeldt. "We should have fallen back from Limburg."

"But this," smiled Christian, "is the road to Frankfurt."

The French *Maréchals* now galloped up, their brilliancy cloaked against the cold; they were dispirited and reluctant, and awaited with hostility the orders of the Imperialist Commander-in-Chief.

Christian proposed an instant attack upon the enemy. He had swiftly secured his outposts and his lines of communication, and arranged his troops: the regiments of the Emperor, the circle of the Empire, Lorraine, the French and Hesse Cassel on the right; the troops of the Empire, and particularly those of the Swabian circle in the middle; and those of the French cavalry at the left; and then gave orders for all to march so in a half-moon, and to address the enemy on the front and by the side with resolution and vigour.

After these deliberations and orders, the Imperialists threw themselves on the enemy from all parts and with all their forces, and with a general cry from all the troops, shouts which rose higher than the blowing banners and the wintry trees; shouts which contained, not the name of Leopold, but that of General Crack . . . a name which always seemed to swell with presage of success.

The clash of conflict was instant; the struggle ferocious. The enemy was soon constrained, not only to abandon his ground, where he had been entrenched, but even to fly in disorder; the soldiers began to throw themselves into the river in an effort to save themselves on the other side; and that with so much confusion and fright that the Hanoverians, pressing on the narrow bridge, choked on the pontoons, crowding one against the other, and so fell into the river, those that were being saved in the battle being drowned in the Lahn.

General Crack himself had engaged the cavalry of the enemy and made there a great carnage, the troops that had been hurled against him had been defeated by the Croats and the Dragoons of the Emperor, supporting his own Uhlans. The artillery of the enemy, which had been set on the other side of the river, and exposed to the continual fire of the musketeers, was soon abandoned in disorder; some of

the Imperialists, forcing over the river by the pontoons, closed with the gunners, and reversed both them and their guns into the ebon water.

The fight was bloody, obstinate, but not doubtful; it lasted from two o'clock in the afternoon to five o'clock in the evening, when shot and charge still continued in the solid gloom of the winter dark.

There were many killed and wounded on one side and the other, but more losses on the part of the Allies, who lost some of the flower of their bravest troops, so many being drowned in the icy depths of the Lahn.

A great number of standards and flags were taken, and there was a rich booty of baggage and artillery, of money, swords, horses, rich arms, precious habits and many other such things; and with the dawn the Imperialists were still drawing the bodies out of the river, and plundering them of their apparel.

Christian had put his less experienced troops in the centre, and the older troops, and those on whom he could count the more, at the wings; and it was to this, and to the intrepid cavalry charge of the French and his own Uhlans that he owed the day; it was the first occasion on which he had been surprised at his own success, for it was the first time that he had fought with cold deliberation and no exultation in the conflict.

Leopold, who found all inaction intolerably odious, had himself led the Imperial Guard in one charge after another on to the earthworks of the enemy.

In the confusion of the bewildering combat, the sombre day, the incessant snow, he had not for long known how the battle went, nor even been greatly concerned. The fight to him had seemed like the flux and reflux of the waves, which surge forward and fall back turn by turn. Imprinted on his mind and heart forever was the grey picture of the river, the black wood beyond, the grey sky beyond that, and the struggling men, the troops, battalions and squadrons in disorder, pontoons breaking beneath the load of fugitives, the desecrated woods that seemed to mourn

over the lamentations of human brain, the shouts of human rage.

Frequently he saw Christian, riding here and there, galloping backwards and forwards, three horses killed under him; leaving nothing to chance, exhausting all his resources, all his energy, all his courage; and for what?

"To put the crown on my head!" thought Leopold, and sickened in the midst of the slaughter; sickened as passionately as he had once delighted in the thought of Eleanora.

When the dawn came, the enemy had been completely beaten across the river, and had fallen backwards still further than the river, in a complete retreat. They had, however, still thirty thousand cavalry, absolutely fresh, who had been only spectators of the combat, it being impossible for them to pass the Lahn.

The Imperialists were exhausted. They had fired the last rounds of their ammunition; they had very little bread; the slaughter had been high; the men were fatigued; pursuit was therefore impossible. Christian, after resting his exhausted troops a few hours, and allowing them time for plunder, continued the road to Frankfurt, some regiments of Croats and Dragoons being left to watch the enemy and observe his movements.

Christian had from Limburg sent messages to all his scattered troops for reinforcement, and the day after the battle one of these arrived, under the conduct of Prince Ulrich of Würtemberg, with a fine train of artillery, and wagons full of provisions. Besides the booty, which was considerable, each man received a month's pay. But Christian, ever pressing forward, found the great obstacle to his progress was still the lack of bread, and all manner of forages; other expected convoys had not come up. Theft, corruption and laziness on the part of those charged with the Commissariat were responsible for this condition; these unsupported victories were of little gain.

"You are ill served," said Christian to Leopold; and these were the only words he had spoken to him since they left

Limburg. "No food, no forages, no munitions, no provisions, no convoys, commissionaires and the treasurers of the army always absent, punctilios, jealousies and divisions between your generals! Eh, Sire, and yet I think I have set you on the throne."

Punctual to his appointment on the first day of February, he entered the towered streets of Frankfurt, Leopold riding by his side. The town overflowed with the potentates and princes evoked by the Emperor to the Diet, and everywhere was an atmosphere of rejoicing, of festival, and the acclamations of victory.

Christian, who, so hampered that he had been like a man with his hands tied behind him, had pressed on to Brussels, taken Brussels, and returned, fought his way through the enemy, and was now prepared to place the crown on the head of Leopold at Frankfurt, was the hero of this resplendent gathering. It seemed to Leopold that he heard nothing but the name and praises of his Commander-in-Chief. Even those who most detested his advancement, and were most jealous of his supremacy—his enemies, in fact—spoke of him in terms of tense admiration; everywhere it was General Crack.

Leopold, lodged at last in the palace at Frankfurt, sent for Hensdorff, who, with other civilians, had painfully followed the progress of the victorious army. The snow now lay thick upon the ground, and fell softly from clouds of sombre greyness, alike on roofs and spires. Hensdorff passed through rooms filled by secretaries and the press of business, to that inner chamber where Leopold sat, alone, writing in his own hand letters with a feverish haste.

"So, Sire, we arrive here at last!" said Hensdorff, grimly. "Nor have we been so long upon the road; Prince Christian has fulfilled his contract to the very letter."

"I have scarcely seen him, and not spoken to him," replied Leopold, hastily, "but every one shouts for him. I hear of nothing else. Count, at last I can breathe and think a little; since we left Limburg I have not had a second; always on the march, always on the alert."

Hensdorff did not answer.

"What," asked Leopold, desperately, "shall I do?"

"You will be crowned," said Hensdorff, quietly. "Then, I think, the Allies will make peace. War is over."

"And then?" asked Leopold. "And then?"

Hensdorff knew what he wanted to say, and replied:

"Sire, the matter in which you want my assistance is beyond my advice."

"I'll marry her," murmured Leopold, biting his lower lip.

"An embassy to Rome can arrange that."

"That's the reward you'll give him!" smiled Hensdorff, sourly. "As soon as he has crowned you, you'll steal his wife! That will be a pretty scandal with which to begin your reign, Sire!"

"But it is unthinkable," replied Leopold, "that I should *not* marry her. . . ." But he knew that he spoke from convention, not from passion.

And Hensdorff, shrugging his bent shoulders, said: "The whole affair, Sire, has been unthinkable."

"The moment must come when he will know," whispered Leopold; and then he added, fearfully: "Or do you think it possible so to gloss it over that he will never know? I have written to her so often, Hensdorff; but she never writes to me."

Hensdorff did not answer, but stared out at the snow, which looked so blank and bleak beyond the gold and purple brocade of the stiff curtains.

"I should like to take her away from Ottenheim," continued Leopold, in the extreme of uneasy anguish, "or else to send my sister there. I had thought of that, Hensdorff."

The minister gave an angry exclamation. This suggestion seemed to him the height of childish folly.

"It is quite impossible for Your Majesty to marry this lady," he said, briefly. "The scandal of such a wedding would pull your crown off your head again."

"My God!" cried Leopold, in nervous impatience. "What is a crown to me? It is you and your like, Count—all the

tribe of you, ministers and place keepers and soldiers alike, who have thrust it on me. What do you think these last weeks have been to me but a stinging torment?" He added, in a fearful whisper: "He had that Transylvanian shot; gagged and shot. That was horrible, Hensdorff! Never can I get it from my mind. He made me witness it. Now, why?"

"I do not understand Prince Christian myself," returned Hensdorff. "No doubt in time he will explain himself."

"Keep him away from me," cried Leopold, in shuddering agitation. "I can stand very little more of it. And Anhalt-Dessau: I saw him in the street to-day. Keep him away from me, Hensdorff!"

"God give you *some* courage!" replied the minister, scornfully. He brought out his wallet, and proceeded to transact some necessary business. Leopold signed every document that was put before him, without even glancing at the contents; and a quiet smile twisted Hensdorff's thin lips.

When these matters were over, and he had risen to take his leave, he said, carefully:

"There is one other piece of news that I must give to Your Majesty: the Duchess of Schönbuchel is dead."

"Dead?" muttered Leopold. "She, and Gabor, and Pons—all dead? How near death comes to us, Hensdorff! But she was old, was she not?" he added, anxiously. "This—this did not kill her?"

"Yes, she was old," admitted Hensdorff, drily. "About my age, Sire. I, too, often feel death very near—a brush of his wings across one's face, now and then, to remind one of his passage. Well, she is dead; and without speaking, as far as I know. I heard the news yesterday. She died in Dürsheim. These hard winters kill the old folk, Sire!"

"She cursed me!" shivered Leopold. "I know she died cursing me—and that's an ugly thing: two curses, Hensdorff, his and hers. What did Pons say: 'Blast him to all eternity!'"

"You should not have heard that," replied Hensdorff.

"One does hear," replied Leopold, with a rigid smile. "And there's another of them, Hensdorff: and what about him—what about Christian, when he hears—eh?"

"We must not think of that," said Hensdorff.

"And for her," demanded Leopold, passionately; "must we not think of her? Is there nothing to be said or done there?"

Hensdorff answered, abruptly:

"Nothing."

"I wish the snow would cease!" said Leopold, pacing up and down with restless impatience. "Sometimes it seems to me unbearable, Hensdorff—those closed skies and this incessant snow!"

"Think of your achievements," smiled the old man, drily. "You are, Sire, at last the Emperor. No mock or demi-Cæsar: the Emperor!"

But Leopold only repeated, in low yet frantic tones:

"If some one would tell me what to do!"

With a shrug and a sigh, Hensdorff left him, and, proceeding wearily with his two secretaries through the snowy streets, went to the house where Christian lodged, with many of the French and Austrian generals: a noble Château, overlooking the sluggish river, and in full view of the dominating church where Leopold was so soon to be crowned by the Papal Legate.

Christian would not see him; he sent out courteous excuses: he said that his antechambers were overflowing with a press of applicants and people on business. He begged Hensdorff to defer the honour of an interview.

"He evades me," thought the old man; "he does not wish me to guess his designs or his heart."

How penetrating the cold was! How black the river beneath the clouded sky! Soft and steady, the snow fell all night.

Hensdorff was kept awake by coughing. He felt old and sick. Horribly in his thoughts was that girl, wasting and withering at Ottenheim. What had she heard? What did she know of what had taken place outside the walls of that

gilded palace? And what place would she find in Prince Christian's final account?

Hensdorff turned, as he had not turned for many years, to the emblem of suffering and sacrifice. He held his lamp beneath a crucifix that he had found in his apartment, and gazed at it long, with eyes dim and bleared with tears and age, while, like a panic, swept over him the realization of the full horror of this long-suspended revenge; that Christian, so outraged, so intolerably wronged, had held his hand and performed his bond made the prospect of his ultimate vengeance more dreadful.

"How long will he stay his hand?" groaned Hensdorff, like a prayer. "How long—how long?"

There was something stupendous and dreadful to Hensdorff in that long self-control, that complete calm. A man who can so control himself, he knew, is terrible indeed. And he pondered on the fate of the Transylvanian spy, as Leopold had told it to him; and that picture lingered in his mind: a gagged man sent to his last account, without a chance to open his mouth for appeal or defiance: the insolent words that he had spoken to Christian the last that he was ever to speak. . . .

The lamp trembled in Hensdorff's withered hand. He set it down upon the table, and the little light it gave did not enable him any longer to see the crucifix. He wished, with a certain fatigued dulness, that he might die, like the Duchess of Schönbuchel had died—quietly, in his bed; escaping the winter and the events that filled the winter. For he, like herself—like the old Duchess and like Colonel Pons—had no hope of any spring.

In a restless search for distraction, he went to the window, and looked across the river at the palace where General Crack lodged. There were lights in all the windows, carriages before the door, and people going in and out through the large, bright entrance. An evening bell rang out, with melancholy clearness. It seemed to Hensdorff to strike a note that was the deepest earnest of a complete despair.

The world shuddered into a gaudy blank beneath a pitiless and an inscrutable heaven.

"I am too old for these unquiet thoughts," mused Hensdorff. "I have lived my life, and it is time I was relieved of my post. Why do I concern myself with all these passions, that to me are withered as the last leaf on a dead tree?"

His tired glance fell to the dark river flowing before the house, and of all his tired and tumultuous thoughts came most clearly the thought of the river flowing so inevitably to the sea; a commonplace thought, but one that would not be dismissed.

THIRTY-SIX

LEOPOLD knelt before the Papal Legate; his purple mantle lined with ermine hung from his shoulders down the gilded steps. He held in one hand the heavy sceptre, and in the other the glistening globe; the Imperial signet ring was on his finger, and he was girded with Cæsar's Imperial sword; on his head was the Ducal bonnet of Austria.

The old cardinal, bent beneath the weight of vestments, that were as heavy as any warrior's cuirass, held above the young man's blond head the diadem of Saint Leopold: the symbol of temporal power over all the nations of the earth—that fantastic dream of the proudest and most ambitious of men. The Electors and the Princes were grouped round the altar steps. The church was one surging sparkle and glitter, from nave to nave, from aisle to aisle. The pungent sweetness of incense warmed the stagnant winter air.

Leopold looked down at the satin cushion on which he knelt. It had large bullion tassels, and he watched these in childish fascination as they hung down on the steps. He rose stiffly from his knees, scarcely able to move from the cumbrous weight of the Imperial trappings, which were rigid with heavy gems and plates of gold. From every available part of his person, he sparkled with jewels. The Imperial Diadem, resting on a cap of crimson velvet, encircled his brows, and he felt them ache beneath this burden, as he turned to face the gathered princes, potentates and soldiers who filled the old church, where so many emperors had stood, where he stood now. Symbols of his unutterable supremacy were handed, one by one, to the waiting nobles, the apple, the ring, the sword, the sceptre, the globe. . . . He was then able to move, and, with his heavy robe held up

by pages, mount the steps which led to the Imperial Throne, arranged on the right of the altar, beneath a canopy that gleamed with golden eagles.

Leopold glanced round those close-packed, silent, expectant faces, all staring at him; all the faces of men who had supported him, believed in him, fought for him, and come here to see him crowned. He could read nothing into any of these countenances, which were mostly stern, stalwart, and grimly set—scarred and ravaged, many of them, with siege, fatigue and labour. Leopold's blue eyes flickered from one to the other, caring for none of them: looking for one face only in all that gathered press. Near the steps of the throne he found it—the face of Christian of Kurland, who was standing rigid in his mantle over his uniform, with his hat under his arm. And, as Leopold gazed down at him, he gazed up at Leopold; for the first time since that day when Gabor had been shot in the bare field outside Limburg, the glance of these two men met.

Leopold drew back almost imperceptibly into the gorgeous recesses of his throne, and Christian, without moving a muscle, continued to gaze at him. Leopold had again to receive the sceptre, the ring and the sword, and in doing so must withdraw his eyes from those other eyes staring up at him.

He sat stiffly on the throne while the involved ceremonial worked to its splendid conclusion. He had lost all sense, both of his own identity and of reality. He thought that if a doll, an image, a puppet had feeling, it must feel as he felt now—seated up there, raised above all these other men, tricked out with all this gorgeous bravery of detail, adorned with every adornment, sparkling with every gem, crushed and confined by imposing robe and crown.

As the Latin chant continued to rise and fall on that still, incense-sweetened air, he slowly turned his head again and looked down at that group of nobles to his right; and there was General Crack, still looking at him, with no expression at all, but with an unblenching steadiness.

Again Leopold had to show himself to the men who had

chosen him. The Papal Legate took him by the hand, and led him to the front of the altar, and made the gesture of presenting him to his Electors.

Three times they shouted for him, with a continuous and steady voice; but Leopold did not heed these shouts. He looked at one man only: Christian; and that man did not open his lips, but remained with folded arms, listening and watching, silent, while the others gave their steady acclamations.

Leopold put his hand to his throat, where the gold cords that held his mantle tugged hard at his neck. He tried to loosen or ease this, for he felt that he was stifling. Nothing in the large, crowded church mattered to him save the man who was not shouting out his name.

Hensdorff, who had been regarding him closely, thought that he would faint, and had a grotesque and horrible picture of him sinking from his throne, with his diadem rolling to his feet. But Leopold was able to control himself. He went through his pompous part with passive patience and mechanical dignity. He had been all his life trained for this moment.

In silence he allowed himself to be disrobed, only giving a light sigh as the portentous mantles were lifted from his tired shoulders. At the head of the most sparkling and resplendent cavalcade that Europe could produce, he rode through the streets of Frankfurt, with the man who had not acclaimed him by his side, and a train of princes behind.

The snow, which had not ceased for twenty-four hours, was still falling. It lay a foot deep in the narrow streets, and white and blank upon the sloping roofs, and outlined with ghastly lividness the tall spires. For all these sharp rigours of this inclement weather, the streets were crowded; there were masques and carnivals to-night. The people pressed at the windows and on the pavements, in doorways and on balconies. For one who shouted for Leopold, there were twelve who shouted for General Crack.

Leopold turned to speak to the man who rode so silently beside him.

"You see, Prince," he managed to say, "that you are very popular; and much appreciated in the Empire. What I could do would be but little, after such popular enthusiasms."

"It is all of it," smiled Christian, "very little."

"You may," said Leopold, with an even greater effort, "command me in what you will. I should have assured you of that before, but there has been, in these last hurried days, little opportunity for speech."

"And no occasion for speech, Sire," replied Christian.

They crossed the bridge, over the black and rapid river, the main cortège flashing many colours through the greyness and the heavy, falling snow.

Leopold remarked:

"The roads will be bad—perhaps impossible; and my sister must have been delayed; she should, Sir, have been here to-day," he added, in another attempt to draw his companion into friendly conversation: the most nauseous mockery, yet one he felt compelled to perform. He could not endure that silent man. He must, he would, make him speak. . . .

Christian replied:

"The weather is very severe. It is as well the campaign has ended." And he referred drily to the six months' truce which had been signed last night.

"I owe everything to you!" said Leopold, like an automaton. "At the Diet you shall hear my formal thanks, and receive my formal reward." He thought, as they clattered through streets: "I shall have to give him Kurland—I promised Kurland; and perhaps another province too. And then he will be independent of me."

They reached the Palace, which sparkled with many lights through the thickening snowstorm; for, though it was yet early in the day, an increasing darkness had overspread the city.

The Emperor dismounted, with two princes at his stirrups, and entered the house followed by all the cavalcade. There was to be a banquet, and some punctilious rejoicing;

a fine, gilded flower of victory, spreading itself open to the sun of applause; in the courtyard a heart-shaped fountain would run with red and white wine.

The flavour of meat, the perfume of pastry, and the odours of preserves, came down the warm corridors; lamps and candles were reflected in a million facets of crystal, which gave forth a million different colours.

Christian ascended the broad stairs with Leopold, step for step, side by side.

All the wide doors stood open on the banqueting room; they could see the hundreds of lustres gleaming on the board, where the gold plate was loaded with exotic fruits, the supreme luxury of this winter season. And the empty throne showed haughty on the dais underneath the Imperial canopy; the French had long been in occupation of the free city and had introduced every luxury.

Leopold thought, restlessly: "To-morrow at the Diet he must take the oath of fealty to me; I shall see him kneeling in front of me, he must put his hands between mine, and do homage for Kurland." There could be no evasion of that. Together with all the other princes of the Empire, Christian would have to take the vows of obeisance to Leopold. And the Emperor stared at him, wondering how either of them would get through that scene.

The musicians were already playing in the gallery; a light and delicate and mournful melody came softly through the empty banqueting room into the crowded corridors. As the Archduchess had not arrived in time for the Coronation, there were no women: only the men—close-pressed ranks of men, the Electors, the Princes, the Generals and the Ministers, who had pledged their names and fortunes to the cause of Leopold of Bavaria.

The snow and the darkness increased. It seemed as if the intensity of the silent storm was invading even the brilliantly lit palace. All the lustre and splendour of the inner lights seemed dimmed by the outer darkness; a darkness more potent and more poignant than the mere darkness of night.

In the Imperial antechamber, Leopold took off his fur cloak, his gloves, his hat, and adjusted the brilliant civilian dress he wore: a gala attire, shimmering, powdered with brilliants and pearls. He gazed at himself in the long mirror, curled round with lilies, above the black mantel-shelf, and could not escape again that insistent sensation of unreality, as if this bedizened creature that he gazed at could not possibly be himself—could not be that man who, in the shameful dawn, had crept away from Ottenheim with Gabor's sneers behind him, and her mute and stricken face gazing after his retreat.

In the mirror he saw Christian, Hensdorff and De Lisle enter the room, with the Margrave of Baden, the Marquis of Mantua, the Elector of Saxony, the Elector of Würtemberg and some other gentlemen. He did not turn and face them, but continued to gaze at their reflexions in the mirror.

All took off their outer attire—all save Christian, who remained as he had entered, his hat under his arm, his cloak hanging by the gilt chain from his shoulders, all flecked and marked with snow, fading into wet.

Leopold turned slowly until his back was to the mirror; but he did not face them, for his glance was downcast. He was, however, acutely aware that Christian had stepped into the middle of the room, and he heard him say, softly, in a voice quite expressionless:

"Sire, it is understood that I have fulfilled my compact."

Leopold did not answer to this challenge and there was a murmur of surprise from the other men, who all looked keenly and quickly from Leopold to Christian.

Hensdorff put his withered hand to his mouth; the long suspense was over; the inevitable moment had arrived at last; he at least was glad of that, whatever malignant fate prevailed in the conclusion.

He replied for Leopold, in a low unsurprised voice:

"Certainly Your Highness has fulfilled your engagement."

Prince Christian turned slightly towards him, but continued to address the Emperor.

"I undertook to serve in this campaign," he said, "to take

the command of your forces, Sire, and to crown you at Frankfurt, besides bringing the war to some manner of halt with the Allies. This has been done. Yesterday an armistice was signed; to-day you were crowned."

"I have disputed none of this," murmured Leopold, temperately, "nor my obligation to you."

Christian glanced indifferently round the faces of the other men, who watched him in such an amaze of curiosity; they were nothing to him, but the witnesses of his official action.

"Then, gentlemen, you see me absolved from further service. My employment is at an end."

"Surely, Prince," protested De Lisle, eagerly, "you would not put matters in those terms, as if you were some mercenary, who has done his task and now asks for pay and goes?"

"I do put it in those terms," replied Christian with the greatest courtesy for the old Maréchal, "and I am a mercenary, and I have served my term and go; but I do not ask for pay."

He spoke lightly, and in a low voice, as if the matter was indifferent to him, and the occasion but an ordinary occasion; that was his pride, to keep the moment above passion; yet they were all silent, held and puzzled by the words he spoke, and by his aspect; he appeared to tower even beyond his actual majestic height.

Leopold continued to keep his glance downwards; Maréchal De Lisle spoke again, still with eagerness and a certain distress.

"You speak as if you put down your command, Prince; but that seems scarcely possible!"

"It is what I do, Monseigneur," said Christian; "but first I would have an admission that I have accomplished what I undertook."

Receiving no reply from Leopold, he looked at Hensdorff, and Hensdorff replied:

"It is true that you have done all that you undertook to do, and perfectly put through your part."

"Well, then, I am free of it, Monseigneur," responded Christian; "and that is all I have to say."

"You leave us, then?" cried De Lisle, ruefully.

Christian glanced at him, and beyond him at the curious and disturbed Electors and Princes, all beginning to ponder their own interests.

"We are in carnival here," he smiled; "this is a festival. Let us put up our masks, that there be no scandal to mar these rejoicings! Messeigneurs, if we meet again, it will be with admiration, whichever side we separately serve."

Hensdorff had now gone up to Leopold, and said, with clear insistence:

"Has Your Majesty nothing to say to him?"

Leopold looked up, and said with painful difficulty:

"What should I have to say to him? It seems he lays his charges down without any permission of mine! Would you have me try to stay him?"

"Nothing could stay me," remarked Christian. "I only pause to know you hold me absolved of all my oaths."

The Prince of Würtemberg asked:

"What vast intents has Your Highness, that you must thus, of a sudden, abandon us? Will you not share in the fruits of your own victories?"

"I cannot dispute or quarrel over those," replied Christian. "I have but come here to lay down my charges and to say farewell to all of you, Messeigneurs. Go in to your feasting undisturbed by any thought of me."

"Where will you go?" demanded Hensdorff, "and whom will you serve?"

To that last replied Christian:

"No one; I am again my own master."

He took off his collar of diamonds and laid it on the little light table by Leopold; then unfastened and placed beside it the other crosses, jewels and honours that he had received from the hands of the Emperor; as he shifted his cloak they all remarked that he no longer wore the Imperial uniform, but that of his own Uhlans.

"I have no desire for these," he remarked. "If I have

need of them again, I will take them from the hands of another man."

He stood now quite close to Leopold, who looked at him for the first time, hardly able to forbear shrinking before that potent presence, and spoke, quietly and levelly, yet under his breath, as if he had not the power to raise his voice:

"Do you rebel against me?" he asked. "Do you defy me?"

"Neither," said Christian. "You never have been any master of mine."

At this, there was a little movement among the other men, and one or two of them put their hands to their sword-hilts; but Leopold made a gesture that held them still; though deeply curious.

"No subject of yours; no servant of yours!" added Christian. "Take back your trifling rewards. I am not here to destroy your festival."

Leopold put his hand to his bosom; this was intolerable, could not be further hushed up. . . .

"Twenty times since you began to speak," he murmured, "my heart has failed me to say what I have to say."

"I leave you," smiled Christian, "at the mercy of those unspoken words."

Into a second's pause came Hensdorff's old, thin voice:

"Do you leave us like this, on the verge of the unavoidable gifts of your estates and glories?"

"I have kept my word," replied Christian, with sudden sternness, "and now you must hire another man to lead your petty fortunes to their tawdry triumphs."

"But this is insupportable!" murmured Leopold. "Not thus can we come to conclusions."

"*Not thus* do we come to any conclusions," cried Christian, turning upon him with sudden ferocity. "We shall meet again and come to our conclusions, you sick, paltering boy!"

"Take that back," gasped Leopold. "I've some power yet—"

"Make it no quarrel here!" cried Hensdorff, stepping between them, while the others, amazed and disordered, stepped back at the words addressed to Leopold, yet relished them as the keen truth. "Make it no quarrel here, Prince Christian—nor you, Sire. As you yourself say, the issue and the conclusion must be in another place."

"Where," asked Leopold, unsteadily, "shall that other place be, if not here and now?"

"No particular spot on earth," replied Christian. "Anywhere where you and I meet together alone and unhampered."

"He defies him! He insults him!" smiled the Prince of Würtemberg. And the Elector of Saxony added, sucking his thick lips: "He insults the Emperor!"

Christian turned to them immediately.

"Take up that challenge when and how you will," he said. "I ask no followers and no support! I can deal, Messeigneurs, with your censure and your displeasure as I have dealt with your support and with your applause—in complete indifference!"

"You talk rebellion, Monseigneur," returned the Elector, hotly, "and cannot be suffered so to depart; who knows what trouble you may cause in the Empire?"

"For nothing am I answerable to you, Monseigneur," replied Christian. "Nay—no longer, now, to any man! Cross not my constancy further, but let us make an end of these peevish quarrellings and womanish railings! Monseigneurs, let me pass."

For the Elector and the Prince of Würtemberg had both made a movement as if to bar the door.

Leopold was weakly supporting himself on the black marble chimneypiece, leaning heavily on his arm and staring down at the heap of gaudy, glittering trinkets that Christian had cast on the table beside him—trinkets that matched those that still he himself wore.

Christian turned to De Lisle, who stood distracted and downcast, and spoke, and now with a certain warmth and hurry in the voice that had been so chill and so contained:

"Here I suspend the exercise of my command," he said, "and speak to you, Monseigneur, as a private gentleman, wishing you all honour and admiration from others as you shall ever have it from me; and all imagined and accustomed glories to the arms of France."

He held out his hand, and old De Lisle's grasped it warmly, as if he honoured them before them all.

As he spoke to De Lisle, Christian had stood with his back to Leopold, of whom he seemed to take no further heed; but now he turned once again to Hensdorff, and said:

"Give me, Count, my final discharge. Tell me, before these gentlemen, that I leave you without fleck or slur upon my reputation."

"You have behaved," said Hensdorff, heavily, "with un-deviating honesty and stern honour, from the day when we first made our bargain, Prince. I here acquit you of all further obligation."

"Must you," asked Leopold, hoarsely, "further gall me with all this? Let him begone, Hensdorff! Immediately let him begone—I could have him arrested for this."

"Perhaps I should tell you," remarked Christian, looking at him again and now addressing him without any title of honour, and as he spoke putting his hat upon his head, "perhaps I should tell you that many of my officers are apprised of my intention, and many of the troops go with me: those of my own raising and my particular loyalty. They have not been seduced from your service, for it was I who brought them into that. It was always General Crack, and not Leopold of Bavaria whom they served."

"A division at such a moment?" murmured one of the princes. "We are undone before we are well got together!"

"Look to yourselves," smiled Christian. "You have your Emperor crowned: see you keep him so!"

"It will make an ugly tale abroad!" muttered the Elector of Saxony, "and do grievous harm to all of us. I do not think that your reputation, Prince Christian, will shine the clearer."

And Christian replied, staring him down:

"I have no vanity that the world should admire me."

"Gentlemen," said Leopold, "let him go—or I will put him under arrest."

Maréchal De Lisle here reminded him that the King of France ruled in Frankfurt and that he as His Majesty's representative would be no party to the arrest of Prince Christian.

Christian saluted them all, ignoring the Emperor, and passed out of the antechamber into the corridors, crowded with people pressing to the Imperial banquet.

He had closed the door behind him, but it was opened again almost immediately, and Hensdorff came out. The old man touched the soldier's sleeve to attract his attention, for Christian was looking ahead of him, making his way, not without difficulty, through the surging crowd. When he looked back quickly over his shoulder, Hensdorff said:

"I would come with you, Monseigneur!"

"Whatever my destination?" asked Christian, pausing.

And Hensdorff, nodding and coughing a little, said:

"Whatever your destination! I have suffered," he added, below his breath, "every variety of chance and fortune, and have little more to fear or lose, nor much, I think, is left to endure."

The two men made their way out through the chattering crowd, who were but waiting for the appearance of the Emperor in the banqueting room to take therein their own places. Christian and Hensdorff were saluted and observed by many; no one thought that they did other than move from one part of the palace to another, in readiness for the prolonged festival. They had left the mansion and were on the broad entrance steps before any one could have credited their departure.

Hensdorff noted that Christian had everything in readiness; his troop of Uhlans were waiting in the narrow, snowy street; his own horse was ready, led by two grooms, waiting for him. Hensdorff found his attendant lackey, and sent instantly for his carriage. All outer sounds were muffled by the trodden snow that lay so deeply in the streets—all

sounds of men and horses, coming and going; but not the sounds from the palace and the banqueting room, which, muffled yet strident, came clearly down the street from the high-set windows.

Hensdorff did not ask where Christian was going. He bid his coachman follow the little cavalcade of Uhlans wherever they might proceed.

Leopold was seated upon his dais now, seated upon his throne under his Imperial canopy, surrounded by full and unblemished pomp; yet there was one dull noise continuously in his ears, above the babble of all the flatteries and adulations that flowed about his loaded table: the muffled clattering sound beneath his window of troop after troop, regiment after regiment, tramping through the streets.

He longed, yet dreaded, to know what this endless movement of troops might be, and he looked round uneasily for Hensdorff: Hensdorff, who was always there, ready to give him advice and support and consolation. He wanted to ask Hensdorff what was occurring in the town, if he should not go abroad; and, staggering and irresolute as he was in his mind, he began to sway himself to some passion of great deeds, some hope and desire of heading his own troops against the rebels and the rebellions—for such, he believed, rebels and rebellions were now surging in the noble streets of the free city; rebellion led by General Crack, ay, he must deal with that. . . .

But Hensdorff was not there. When Leopold at length asked one of the Electors where the minister had gone, that Prince replied, not resisting a leer:

“Count Hensdorff went with General Crack.”

Leopold looked round the feast and saw many empty places; and, while the faultless ceremonial of the banquet went forward, several more rose and left the table, with but a curt obeisance to the Emperor and some jesting excuse to their neighbours, for by now most of them knew of the breach between Christian and Leopold, and all were quite well aware who was the better man; and the Emperor knew that they knew it and what these departures meant . . . yet

he would not have cared if Hensdorff had stayed; ah, they were ringing the bells now—through the bells and the sound of the music played in the gallery you could hardly hear the clatter of the cavalry; how grave De Lisle looked, neither eating nor drinking . . . but he, the Emperor, would drink. . . . He would consume the most fiery wines though her face was in every glass—the face of a fury now red with horror. . . .

He spoke to De Lisle, who, as representative of France, sat in the place of honour on his right hand.

“Maréchal, shall we go presently to the theatre? There is a delicious Columbine, the prettiest possible they say”; he added with a wild accent he could not control: “but you will remember one who outshone her, Angélique, who danced like a plummy wave, but was a slut from Naples, the Duke of Kurland’s harlot—”

No one in the room who heard that name but paused in what he said or did and stared at Leopold.

De Lisle replied coldly:

“That were better said to his face, Sire, or not at all.”

“Rebuked by you, Monseigneur?” replied Leopold bitterly. “See how I am fallen through dealings with ignoble men!”

And yet he sat so high, placed above them all in the utmost ostentation of trophied potency . . . ah, must they play an aria from *Alexander in Egypt*? . . . through those tinsel strains of mock triumph he could hear the troops leaving Frankfurt, boldly through the snowy streets. . . .

THIRTY-SEVEN

MEN saw portents in the sky that winter and combats of ghostly warriors, as if the perpetual combats on the earth had been mirrored in the continuous snow-clouds. The weather was of unbroken gloom and overbearing severity; the waters of the Danube lay bound for miles under black ice; the marshes of Styria were one endless fog. Starved birds dropped dead from the cold, blasted trees onto the iron-hard ground. Tempests tore up from tumultuous seas, and battered the devastated land. Men beheld comets rending fierce midnight skies, lambent meteors like bloody flags, and darkling monsters peering from the icy waves that clawed at the shores. One beleaguered town had shuddered beneath a rain of blood, and another had seen shadowy giants struggling on the besieged ramparts; everywhere terror, rumours, and omens of horror.

The Empire fell apart, like a huge body loosened by decay, and on every fragment the vultures gathered.

Europe stood back, holding to the armistice. The French withdrew into Lorraine, the Spaniards into the Southern Netherlands, the English and the Hanoverians went home; but the Pagans gathered in portentous multitudes in the East, only waiting for the first relaxing of the winter, the first possibilities of the spring, to hurl themselves at the gates of Budapesth and Vienna. The laboriously built-up empire of Leopold of Bavaria was scattered, as a castle made of dried leaves might be scattered by the first blowing of a winter wind. Princes and cities fell away from him daily; after his coronation at Frankfurt he could scarcely call himself an emperor: his glory had begun and ended on that one occasion. Even at the Diet, many of the Electors gave him their open defiance. His cause was too paltry for their selfish upholding.

After the defection of his Commander-in-Chief, he appeared so unnerved that most of his supporters regarded him as a man doomed to immediate defeat, and therefore left him; Count Hensdorff had gone too, the old minister who had held them all in check—or at bay; who had soothed and promised, consoled and threatened, with so much art. No one knew what quarrel Leopold had had with these two men, but they gave him the wrong of it, and this from his very look and bearing. Many of the potentates went immediately to swear fealty to the husband of the Queen of Hungary. Others went back to their provinces in sullen neutrality, watching cautiously and viciously for an opportunity to serve their own ends.

Maréchal De Lisle shrugged and returned to Paris, glad that the campaign had come to an end, and earnestly, in his heart, resolving to advise the ministers of His Most Christian Majesty to waste no more time or money or men upon Leopold of Bavaria, and to endeavour to entice to Paris General Crack, now Maréchal de France.

Some troops and some generals remained to the Emperor. There was his own especial Imperial Regiments, and the Circle of Swabia, which were as yet loyal; and they did what they could, but with a certain reluctance, though Leopold promised concessions and rewards to every one. Indeed, he lavished his favours with too prodigal a hand; made those whom he caressed and flattered suspicious that it would never be in his power to fulfil his opulent pledges.

The King of Prussia abandoned him immediately, and made his pact with the rival claimant to the Imperial Throne; and General Crack rode across the ruin of the Empire, in open revolt and open defiance, serving no cause but his own. He had secured, and without great effort, part of Pomerania, for neither Poland nor Russia interfered with him there: and the people welcomed him passionately, as the one heroic figure of a mean and doubtful hour. He had those qualities which ever impress the populace. There was something symbolic of the greatest that may be expected of mankind in his courage, his energy and his intelligence. The finest

of Leopold's troops had followed him over the many-arched bridge of Frankfurt the day of the Emperor's coronation. He had raised many more by the sheer power of his name. And many princes, hoping to join in the plunder of his inevitable victories, had joined his standard. Towns and forts undergarrisoned, or even entirely abandoned by Leopold, surrendered to the troops of Christian of Kurland at sight, not knowing, in the most bitter and most bloody of confusion, whom he served; nor greatly caring, as long as they received a temporary respite from the black miseries of war.

From all such places, Christian tore the Eagles down and put up the flag of Kurland; he still kept his gaze on Kurland. In a few weeks it might have seemed that he had as good a chance of the disputed diadem as either of the rival Hapsburgs. His gluttoned and triumphant soldiery reminded themselves of the old days of Rome, when the troops had chosen their own Emperor from among their most successful members. It was well known that Christian had always wanted power—more and more power. No one believed that he would have long served any Cæsar. Why he had put this particular Cæsar up to drag him down remained a bewilderment.

To no man did he explain himself. General Crack had now contemptuously cast off his adherence to the Lutheran faith, and was again surrounded with priests and Jesuits: though how the Pope might view his position no one yet knew. He harried Romanists and Protestants alike, pursuing the harassed Leopold through all the woods and cities of the Empire.

He called himself Sovereign Duke of Kurland, and none whose words he was likely to hear were desirous of disputing his title, though he acknowledged no emperor to secure him in the fief. He had his court, his generals, his complete organization for war; but no man was of his constant company, save Count Michael Hensdorff, whose long and painful labours had gone to raise the man whom Christian had so easily and contemptuously toppled over.

Though languishing and suffering from the atrocious

inclemency of the weather, Hensdorff travelled everywhere with Prince Christian: whether as adviser or no was not known. Christian was not the man to accept the counsels of any one; yet if he was not relying upon the dry and experienced wisdom of Hensdorff, there seemed no reason for the queerly contrasted couple to remain together. No one understood the nature of their attachment; nor did Hensdorff open his heart to any.

Once a young adventuring princeling, who had dared to join these rebel standards, had the courage to ask Count Hensdorff how he thought these tangled and ferocious battles would end.

"The Prince," he said, "must either seize the Empire or be crushed utterly. The country is ruined, and cannot support much more warfare. What is the end to be?"

Hensdorff smiled, as if this was the question of a child.

"Monseigneur," he replied, "you joined us for the sake of booty, did you not? Well, secure that same booty while you may . . . there is, as you say, an Empire for your plundering."

But the young man, hesitant and dubious, fearful that he had committed himself too far in his wild venture, grumbled: "It is easier to raise a whirlwind than to calm it down again. Out of all this chaos, what is to arrive?"

And he had the impudence to add: "It is greatly wondered that you, Count Hensdorff, so good a friend of stable government, and so prudent a statesman, should join this confederacy under Prince Christian, which has no bottom, and, it seems to me, no future."

But Hensdorff replied, with dry indifference:

"If your courage runs out, ride home, Monseigneur."

By the end of March, the very apex of the winter and of the war appeared to have been reached. Howling winds drowned the lamentations of men, and thick snowstorms buried their mangled, starved and exhausted bodies; sombre and tormented rivers cast blocks of ice against the ramparts of beleaguered towns. Tempests, as fiercely as shot and shell, tore down the proudest of battling flags. Night

after night the great comet glared through rifts in the inky clouds, a livid torch above the ruined land. Wolves, grey and gaunt from hunger, harried the camp and howled in the passes. Yet, in some safer places, where the hidden women gathered, there was a hectic gaiety reddened here not by blood, but by the lamps of carnival, and traversed, not by artillery and thundering troops, but by frivolous sledges, shaped like swans, like Neptunes, like mermen and monsters; drawn by dappled horses with high-clipped plumes and dangling trappings.

The Countess Carola was galloping through Vienna in one of these chariots. She had now left her husband, and taken a lover, becoming openly the woman she had always been at heart. In this capital without a government, and severely menaced on several sides, this lady reigned as temporary queen, and mocked at both Leopold and Christian—one as a weakling, and the other as base-born. And she remarked, with exquisite malice, that it did not appear that Prince Christian ever went to visit his wife at Ottenheim; and that she, poor fool, must be lonely enough in that outlandish Château on the Danube!

She commiserated also, with delicate impertinence, the Archduchess Maria Luisa—the unfortunate Emperor's still more unfortunate sister, who had found no husband before her brother lost his throne.

Making painful progress over the winter roads from Brussels, Maria Luisa had learnt of the defection of General Crack, and the crashing downfall of her brother's hopes. She had then refused to pursue her way to Vienna, and, leaving the other women, had endeavoured to join Leopold, who had been obliged to leave Frankfurt, held by the French. The sensitive woman would have preferred to forego the comparative safety of the capital than to go there to listen to the mocks about her brother and herself; for not only had General Crack left them, but Count Hensdorff, their father's friend, on whom they had both, almost passionately, relied; this, to Maria Luisa, was an intolerable humiliation.

Leopold could give her no adequate protection—hardly, even, adequate shelter: and so, through the black horrors of that fell winter, the lady wandered from place to place, staying in inns and palaces as she could find accommodation or inspire charity; scarcely knowing her direction, bewildered by a dozen contrary reports, uncertain of everything, she frequently fled in the winter night on some strident alarm, with the scantiest of escorts.

The end of March there was a brief midnight meeting between brother and sister; he urged her to take shelter in some convent; but there was no such refuge in this part of Germany, and the frightened girl declared that she would endeavour to reach Bavaria, the greater portion of which still held loyal to them; and there to secure some nook in which to hide.

"We both play noble parts, it seems!" she cried, wildly. "You and I harried and harassed here and there!" And she dared to ask: "Why did Christian—why did Hensdorff leave you, Leopold?"

Leopold did not answer this, but replied fearfully:

"I am not utterly undone yet. I will seize them both, and have them shot as traitors, as Christian had the Transylvanian shot at Limburg. Ay, with gags in their mouths, too!"

Maria Luisa did not know what these frantic words meant. They seemed to her the very foam and fume of idle boasting. If her brother could save his life and some portion of his paternal estates, she thought that was all he could save; and she puzzled bitterly over the defection of Count Hensdorff. Christian she might understand: he was a mercenary, of no definite nationality and no definite standing; he might follow his caprices and serve whom he would, or no one at all, as the mood took him. But Hensdorff, grounded so deeply in honour and loyalty to their House, who had been so faithful, even while not believing in the cause he served! For she had seen it, the watching girl: seen Hensdorff's dubious acceptance of her brother; seen his ironic allegiance to Leopold; and relied—always relied!—on his constant

loyalty. And then, at the very moment of the coronation and the triumph, he had deserted to a rebel. . . .

Leopold, shuddering in his heavy military cloak, continued to talk extravagantly of revenge. His sister stared at him in the uncertain light of the lamp above the gateway, where they had met and they must part. Leopold had but a small troop with him, and did not tell his sister where he rode.

"I cannot take you with me now," he said; "but I do not think it will be so long before we meet in Vienna."

But Maria Luisa in terror responded:

"Do not vaunt so, Leopold! Do not vaunt!"

Leopold drew his hat further over his eyes, as if he did not wish her to observe his countenance; and, with a sudden change of fallen voice, muttered:

"I wish you would go to Ottenheim!"

Nothing could have amazed the Archduchess more.

"To Ottenheim?" she exclaimed, peering through the cold gloom.

"Yes, to Ottenheim; but it is impossible," he replied, hastily. "The enemy is between us and there. It is impossible: and yet, I wish you were in Ottenheim, to be with—" But he would not say the name. He bit his lip and looked upon his saddle.

Maria Luisa was bewildered. To her, Eleanora was Christian's wife, and nothing else. She pressed her brother to explain his meaning, and he said, reluctantly:

"I thought two lonely women—and something of an age—that you might be together; but it is a fantasy, like most of my thoughts just now."

"Where are you riding?" asked Maria Luisa.

"I do not know; I am in the hands of Knittelfeldt. I have made him my Commander-in-Chief. He is a capable but an overbearing man," added Leopold, nervously, "and I cannot tell one day what he will do the next. You are safe enough here, but I must go my way."

Maria Luisa remained dutifully behind, though she would have far rather accompanied him in all his perils; nor was she so safe. Within two days the little town capitulated

before the Kurlander's advance and Maria Luisa must again fly in the bitter and unfriendly dawn, with but one child as her companion—a boy who had been her brother's page.

They rode as far as their horses could carry them; but when the animals were exhausted, and they had to leave them at an inn, this was found to be too miserable to supply them with remounts; and it was on foot that the Archduchess had to pursue her way across the frozen fields.

She had been urged, by the commander of the garrison, to throw herself on the mercy of the capturing force. But this was impossible to Maria Luisa. Above all things, all her dreads and terrors, she had this most monstrous terror, of falling into the hands of General Crack.

She had been assured that both her rank and sex alike protected her; but this made no impression upon her resolution. She would rather perish in one of these frost-bound ditches, underneath these blasted trees, than be dragged into the presence of Christian of Kurland—his captive.

She had hoped to reach Altsdorf, a small fortified town which held for Leopold, before nightfall; but was, naturally enough, lost in the bewilderment of the devastated fields and broken woods, over which any rapid or easy progress was impossible. Both she and the boy were almost immediately footsore, and soon cold and faint with hunger; for they had been able to receive only the most miserable meal at the inn, and had neither food nor money with them: not that this last would have been of much use, for, surveying the wild and desolate landscape, Maria Luisa could see no human habitation. The peasantry had long ago abandoned their farms—the men to take arms for one side or another, and the women and children to trail after the armies, or perish on the roads.

"We must pass the night somewhere," said the exhausted Archduchess. "It is impossible for us to reach Altsdorf to-night, even if we knew the direction—which I do not and even the road has disappeared. Everything is frozen over; I cannot distinguish any path." She believed they were walking on a frozen river, for stiff spikes of willows impeded

their progress. The horizon was blotted out in a dense winter fog. Wind and snow were alike borne upon the gathering night.

"We shall be frozen to death," murmured the page, "if we do not find some protection against the weather."

Maria Luisa endeavoured to reassure the boy.

"There are several barns about here—maybe there is straw or hay left in them."

In her heart she knew better than this. There was not likely to be a scrap of any manner of food or provender in a country over which so many armies had marched. "At best," she added, faintly, "we may find that, at least; at the worst, shelter, and to-morrow we can push on to Altsdorf. It cannot be far away."

The boy agreed. He had kept up a brave front, but he was both fatigued and frightened, and, with all that, drowsy with the desire for sleep and warmth, for the cold seemed to increase with every painful step they took, and even the stout thickness of their winter mantles could not defy the penetrating wind.

They halted at a large barn, which was the sole building that remained of what had once been a prosperous farm. The house and stables were gone, the fields and gardens laid waste and frozen over; but this barn remained, though one side of it was torn down, and open to the bitter night.

The boy had a pistol, and flint and tinder, and was for making a fire; but Maria Luisa, in her great fear, forbade this. "There might be foragers about," she said, "and that would draw their attention. I would rather perish of cold than fall into the hands of the rebels!"

With a shudder of distaste, she made her way into the inner part of the barn, where there yet remained a pile of old sacks and some brushwood. Fearful of rats, she peered about in the sombre gloom. The place was still—appeared to have been deserted even by vermin and insects, and almost as cold as the fields. Yet there was protection from the driving wind and the gathering tempest. Maria Luisa was grateful even for this.

With stiff, chilled fingers, she arranged the sacks and brushwood into two beds, though the boy protested stoutly that he would keep guard all night at the entrance to the barn.

"I am sure," he declared, resolutely, "that Your Highness will sleep much more soundly if I am at my post as sentinel!"

Maria Luisa smiled tenderly.

"No, Ferdinand," she replied, "it would be no use, for in the morning you would be so tired that we should not be able to go on our way; and I should have to wait, while you rested. It is much better for you to go to sleep, and for me to sleep also; and I will put the pistol between us, and if we are roused it will be ready to our hands."

The boy could not, for all his good will, resist, and was soon sound asleep, with the pleasant sleep of youth—agreeable sleep, even in the midst of danger.

Maria Luisa thoughtfully covered him up with his cloak. He was a very young boy, and when he slept, appeared like a child. Then she took from her bosom a little image of her sainted, precious Patroness, the Mother of God, which she had worn next her heart ever since she had left Brussels. She could not see it now, in this cold obscurity; nor could she pray to it, for that same coldness and obscurity seemed to have fallen over her own heart; but she held it closely in her hand, and drew from that contact a certain wistful comfort. Her loneliness was like an icy clutch on her whole being, squeezing all the life out of her; she felt strangled by the gathering dark, by that complete silence, by this extreme isolation. She thought that it must be like this to die, and wake up in another world, where no friend had followed or preceded. She looked into her own heart, as eager enquirers may look into the crystal, hoping to discern there pictures which would allure her from her present misery. And the picture that she immediately saw was Brussels, and that day at the Opera, when Christian had sat opposite to her in the gilded box and received the laurel crown from the actress, robed and garlanded; lusted with gold and sparkling with jewels she beheld that picture, with all the

frivolous pageantry of ostentatious triumph. "Why that picture?" she thought, with irony, "of all others." Why must she warm her chilled hands at those artificial flames?

It was like a prison here, the space so confined, the dark so dense! And surely she was freezing to death; the blood in her veins ran so sluggishly.

Anxiously she bent over the boy. His forehead and his hands were warm beneath the cloak. Then she felt her way to the outer part of the barn, and from that to the edge, and looked over the landscape, still glimmering in the last twilight, as if, even in that dreary prospect, there was more comfort than that foul confinement of the inner room.

She wished that she could see a star—even one little star—but the scowling clouds lowered, thick as hate, across the heavens.

But presently a human light broke the encircling greyness, and a human sound disturbed the ominous stillness. Half in terror, half in hope, Maria Luisa heard the soft sound of horses' hoofs on the bitter air and through the rising wind. Men carrying lanterns were riding near. Why should she be so transfixed with terror she asked herself, impatiently. They might very likely be her brother's men, a foraging party from Altsdorf.

They were riding nearer, and she cowered back into the blackness of the barn, hoping to discern them before they discovered her; but she had already had enough experience of war to know that it was not likely that any troops would pass a barn without looking inside to see if there was any possible provender or booty concealed there.

And the men indeed came up carefully over the frozen ground, and paused before the barn, the foremost of them holding high a lantern that he flashed into the recesses of her shelter.

Maria Luisa hesitated, speculating as to whether this was help or disaster. She could not see the uniforms of the men, for they were all wrapped in pelisses and fur cloaks; but they saw her, almost immediately, and she heard one after another of them exclaim: "A woman!" while a voice

said instantly: "It is the sister of the Elector of Bavaria!"

She knew, by the form this statement took, that they were enemies; Leopold was not the Emperor to them. And when the same voice added, in a tone of indifference: "Madame, you seem in some distress." She knew who it was that spoke: Prince Christian himself—General Crack.

Cowering, she looked up and saw him where he sat among his men, by the lamplight, as she had last seen her brother sit among his men by lamplight.

"This is a heavy chance," she said, bewildered by her own ill fortune, and in the very depths of fear and humiliation.

Christian was wrapped in a heavy fur pelisse to his chin, gloved, booted extravagantly, but she knew his face instantly—a face too familiar to her, although she had not often seen it; and even at that moment, she found time to wonder why he had instantly known her, of whom he had never taken much notice, and who was now so disguised by poor and disarranged attire.

"Cannot Your Highness ride on, and leave me to make my way to Altsdorf?" she asked with timid dignity.

"Altsdorf is ours," he replied, briefly. "If that town is your destination, I can show you some hospitality there."

She cried: "No, no!" with the utmost loathing, and he laughed: a laugh echoed instantly by his men. Two of his soldiers had dismounted, and were searching the barn. They had found the boy, who was struggling with his pistol; and Maria Luisa cried out:

"Monseigneur, you can let him go! He is only a boy—a page of my brother's; the last left of my retinue!"

Christian said:

"Do not hurt the boy, but bring him, with the lady, to Altsdorf. You can, Madame, in this necessity, ride pillion with one of my men."

"I would rather," she replied, desperately, "stay here, and, if need be, perish."

"The decision rests with me," said General Crack, grimly.

She heard more soldiery coming up, and, in fear and

frenzy, put her fingers to her throat as if to strangle herself; but she could not command even this way of escape; she was lifted behind one of the Uhlans and so taken to Altsdorf, as quick as might be over those bitter, frozen fields.

"A light weight," Christian had remarked, watching her swung to the saddle, and then had ridden ahead, taking no further notice of her; how cold it was! the wind smote her as she rode—and how dark!

Earth and sky seemed alike of frozen iron as the cavalcade turned between the narrow battered gates of Altsdorf.

THIRTY-EIGHT

MARIA LUISA was taken to a small, but elegantly equipped house inside Altsdorf. Here, she understood, lodged General Crack and Count Hensdorff. The sound of this man's name gave her some feeling of reassurance, but could not raise her fluttering spirits to any serenity. She could hardly hope for immediate release; too well did she know her value as a hostage. But she did not know how she could long survive an imprisonment so odious, so degrading and so alarming; she was possessed by that utmost terror which comes from a sense of complete abandonment: in this abandonment she thought the saints and angels had combined to leave her desolate.

She saw no women anywhere; in all places, soldiers—soldiers, Croatians, Uhlans and Black Cuirassiers all those familiar uniforms which she had once seen reviewed by her brother, and following the Imperial Eagles.

The room into which she was brought at last had been a woman's room, but was now bare of all adornments. Hasty and agitated hands had snatched down mirrors, curtains—even pictures. All was despoiled and bare; cold, too, for the stove was unlit.

With shaking half-frozen fingers, Maria Luisa strove to adjust her fallen hair, and to reset her tumbled cravat. She wore a dark green riding habit, fashioned like the attire of a man, with epaulettes and gold cords, all much tarnished and awry from her misfortunes and wanderings. She had lost her gloves and hat and riding whip; her wet, soiled cloak had been taken from her. She searched her wide laced pockets. There was nothing in any of them but a few coins; not that thing for which she most longed, and which she fretted at her foolishness in ever parting from—a weapon, a

pistol, a dagger. She had no manner of weapon of any kind, either for defence or self-destruction.

When she ventured to the uncurtained window, and saw the torch-lit garden full of soldiers, she could not resist a frantic impulse to beat upon the casement in her agony. When she went to the door and found it locked, and heard the step of the sentry outside, she had to thrust the back of her hand over her mouth that she might not betray her cowardice by a scream.

Since they had entered the house, she had not seen the boy. She hoped that they would be kind to the boy. . . . And again she took the little image from above her frightened heart, and, dropping on her knees, endeavoured to pray to it, as she had been taught to pray to images, and to find consolation in reliquaries.

She was still on her knees in the centre of the bare floor when the door was unlocked and opened, and there appeared, not a soldier, but a valet in the Kurland liveries, who told her respectfully that supper was served below, and Prince Christian desired her company.

Maria Luisa remained stupidly on her knees, as if she pleaded, not with the image that she held in her hand, but with the impassive lackey.

"Is Count Hensdorff here?" she stammered.

"No, Madame: Count Hensdorff has not returned, but maybe he will be here again to-night."

"Tell your master," replied Maria Luisa, stumbling over her words, "that I am ill, exhausted, and most unhappy, and that I beseech him to forgo my wretched company to-night."

The valet twisted his lips with a look of ironic pity.

"His Highness will take no excuses, and it were best not to inflame him by offering any."

"But it is impossible that I should attend your master," she pleaded, not rising; "look at me, all disarrayed as I am!"

The valet replied:

"I am sorry, Madame, but we have no ladies' habits here—the town has been sacked."

"Are there no women?" she asked. "Is there no one whom you could send to me?"

"There are women enough," he replied, "but I do not think you would greatly care for their presence, Madame."

Maria Luisa rose: she reminded herself that her father had been an emperor, and her brother at least had had the Imperial pretension. There must be some way of meeting this atrocious situation with dignity and pride. . . .

"I cannot," she said, faintly, "be thus summoned into your master's presence, I am the Archduchess Maria Luisa."

The valet had known this; her words, that she had thought so brave, sounded to him but a feeble flourish.

"Shall I tell my master that you refuse to come down, Madame?" he asked, negligently.

And she, debating with herself, thought in her anguish: "Perhaps it is wiser for me to go. . . . Perhaps I should face him, not remain here—to be dragged, I suppose, in the end, into his presence."

"Give me a toilet case, and ten minutes; and I will attend your master at his supper," she said.

The valet withdrew immediately, and almost immediately returned with a luxurious toilet case, which bore, as she instantly noted, the arms of Kurland.

Maria Luisa snatched out the mirror and stared at herself, and the bitterest of all bitter thoughts pierced her heart: "If I were a beautiful woman, none of this would matter!" She was contemptuous of her own pallid face, with the too full mouth and the too light eyes, and that soft tumble of loosened yellow hair. Her one charm, the inevitable bloom of youth, had been ravished from her by fatigue and pain and fear.

Not beautiful, not charming—an awkward, terrified girl, sick with fear and fatigue.

She combed and rolled her hair, and tied it with one of the ribbons from her cravat. She made what adjustments she could in her tarnished attire, and all the while she thought that if there had been any manner of weapon there, she would have thrust it into her bosom sooner than go down

to General Crack; but there was nothing, and she must try to hold her head high as she followed the valet down the stairs. . . . "If I had been beautiful—only for this one night. . . ."

The lackey opened a tall door for her, and instantly she was greeted by the light seduction of brilliant music. The room was splendidly lit; she was, for a moment, dazzled both by the music and the circles of wax lights, and paused upon the threshold of a light and elegant apartment, filled, as a vase may be filled with pure water, with the throb and hurry of the melody which came from two old men in Kurland liveries playing violins. They sat at the foot of a bed, which was partially in an alcove and draped by an imperial of silver mohair. The centre of the floor was bare, and of a shining lustre that reflected the candelabra, crystal and silver, with gauzy lights in them.

Thick velvet curtains were drawn across the night, and the warmth banished all sense of winter. At the far end of this long room was a huge fire, before which was set a supper table; and there Prince Christian stood, leaning on the mantelshelf and watching the door; he had a long clay pipe in his hand, but it was not lit.

He did not stir as she entered, nor did the fiddlers take any heed of her; all three seemed absorbed in the music, the wanton, rich music. Her pride was now stronger than her cowardice. Under cover of the melody, she crossed the gleaming floor, and dropped her captor a curtsy as if she had met him at her brother's court.

"It seems," remarked Christian, regarding her without interest, "a long while since Brussels, and our last meeting after the Opera, eh?"

"Longer to me than to you, Monseigneur, I dare say," she replied, faintly, "since time drags heavily with the unfortunate."

"We need not talk of misfortune to-night," he smiled. "Let us, Madame, have our relaxations and diversions—as your brother had in Ottenheim—sweet interludes to the fatigues of war."

These words stormed the sinking heart of the Archduchess with further fears. She did not know what they meant, nor even that Leopold had ever been to Ottenheim. Enervated by terror, by fatigue and by the lively and voluptuous music, she sank on to the yellow sofa by the gorgeous fire.

Christian had put down his pipe, more, she felt, instinctively than out of any courtesy towards herself; for she believed that his intention was to insult her deeply.

"It is an atrocious chance," she murmured, "that has brought me here." Then, quickly, "Will you not send your fiddlers away? They confuse my mind."

"It is the music I take with me," said Christian, "to distract me when I am in a melancholy; and that is often enough."

In the blaze of light of the many candles she stared at him; he seemed entirely changed. Though she had never known him, yet, in some illusion of the fancy, she had been familiar with him; but now that familiarity had vanished. She looked upon a stranger, one who did not shape into any of her dreams, past dreams in which he had, reluctant to her wish, figured.

The man had altered. Never before had she seen him save in her brother's resplendent uniform; but now he was in armour over a heavily braided coat, and that of a fashion strange to her, which made him further alien to her frightened regard. He wore the garb affected by the Kurlanders and Polanders in winter: blue velvet, heavy with bullion and doubled with fine grey fur. She noticed such gaudy details as pieces of armour lying on the floor, lined with quilted orange satin; such trivialities as these stuck in her mind; she was veiled with fatigue, and all her faculties faltering. Again her fainting speech trembled on her lips, and he, watching her, and unable to hear what she said, demanded what her desire was, bending towards her to catch her words.

"My wish is narrow," stammered the Archduchess. "Only to be allowed to depart . . . you must understand so much."

He asked: "Where is your brother?"

And she shook her shamed head.

"He flies like a hare," smiled Christian; "and like hare will he be caught at last, exhausted, in his final retreat."

She was stung into some poor reply by the unutterable contempt behind his words:

"I do not know the seat of all your malice," she said, "or why you thus discard all manner of civility with me. God may not forgive you for what you do!"

"I," smiled Christian, "have long ago resolved not to forgive God."

Maria Luisa continued to stare at him, incredulous that this was the man whom she had seen—the most sumptuous figure in that sumptuous pageant in Brussels; much older he seemed now, and darker, and there was a look of cruelty and scorn and hard unhappiness in his face which she had never observed there before. His exact features, with the vivid colouring that gave his beauty so showy and glowing a turn, had still an impassive, even a masklike, look; but it was a mask on which was set a terrible expression. He made an impatient gesture towards the musicians, and they ceased abruptly, hastily put away their violins, and, bowing, left the room.

Maria Luisa realized how foolish she had been to demand that they should go, for she was now completely alone with Christian; there had been protection in the old men, even in the sound of the music.

"Do you remember," he asked with curiosity, "that your hand was offered to me, Madame, last autumn?"

"Will you," she demanded, piteously, "further distress my honour by referring to what is solely a humiliation to my mind?"

"Humiliation?" he repeated. "Your brother did not consider humiliation then; he considered his offer another subtle shift to gain my services; but we will not talk of it, since it displeases you."

"I have been all my life most unfortunate," said the Archduchess, "enmeshed with words, trapped into pitfalls; in every way scorned and abandoned. If my pride ever had any aspiring, it is cast down now, and forever, I think.

Monseigneur, whatever your spite and malice against my House, is not this enough for you? Cannot you have the pity to let me depart?"

"Where would you go?" smiled Christian; "the weather is wild, the country racked and ruined."

"Anywhere!" she replied, wildly. "Let me but walk out into the night—return to the barn where they found me. Anywhere. . . ."

"But you would perish. Are you not well housed here?"

"Heaven forgive you for your mockery and for your cruelty! I at least have known no fault towards you!"

"Is it cruelty to keep you here for company?" he smiled. "It is long since I have enjoyed the conversation of one so exalted—an Archduchess: an Emperor's sister!"

Then, discarding his mood of mockery, he added, sombrely:

"Whether you will or no, you shall not go until the morning. Then you may return to your brother and tell him where you have spent your night."

"It is impossible," she stammered, "that you would force me to remain here?"

"There was one thing that *I* thought an impossibility," he answered. "I had, within a narrow space, a little heaven on earth, and I thought it impossible that it should be defiled, or even spied upon by other men. But that is gone!"

"I have not wronged you!" she murmured, in the extreme of bewilderment and fear, shame and humiliation.

Christian laughed.

"The Cæsar's sister—eh? A fair enough piece, by candle-light! To-morrow you shall go where you will, sufficiently escorted; to-night, you remain with me."

"And all your camp to know it?" she cried.

"There will be no secrecy," replied Christian, "as there was none at Ottenheim."

Maria Luisa rose and clasped her hands upon her heart. She felt the little metal image pressing into her bosom.

"Why do you keep talking of Ottenheim?" she said. "I do not understand what you mean. Is not your wife there?"

Why have you left her so long? She is of my age and my helplessness, she also might be exposed to these incredible horrors of war. Can you think of her and still deal with me so atrociously?" She was further terrified by the effect of her words. Christian looked ghastly: she thought that he would faint.

"There is something here I do not know," she muttered, recoiling.

"You will soon know," he replied; "when I send you back to your brother, he will tell you." Then he raised his voice, with a dreadful effort at self-control. "Come, Madame, the supper is set!" And he poured out two glasses of wine. "Here is a cordial for your squeamishness: it is the Ausbruche vintage, made from the spontaneous dropping of the grape—a virgin wine, Madame, which will not long keep . . . eh?"

He drank, filling his glass again and again, as if he toasted her mute anguish. "It is not every night one has an Emperor's sister for company! And I have been very lonely of late, pestered by dreams which seem to come from Hell."

"You have made the whole land a hell," she muttered; "a ruin from which I think none of us can ever arise!"

"Can you help me dispel my dreams?" smiled Christian. "Perhaps with you I might forget, for an hour or two of darkness, eh? Take off your coat," he added, harshly. "The room is warm enough!"

And, as she stood immobile, he made a movement as if himself to divest her of her heavy outer garment. At this, with instant, nervous fingers, Maria Luisa unbuttoned the coat, and dropped it on the floor, showing her long waistcoat and torn, embroidered silk, and the ruffled shirt opened on the bosom. Here she put her hand, driving the silver image into her flesh.

"When the reckoning comes," she asked, wildly, "what will you say?"

"There is no reckoning," smiled Christian; "I hold my destiny in the hollow of my hand."

She could no longer contain herself upright, but dropped

back onto the sophy, and hid her face in the cushions, like a child chid and frightened to extremity; and still she thought, crazily: "If I had been beautiful, no such harm; if I had not secretly loved him, no such harm either! As it is, harm unutterable!"

Then pride overlaid these gusts of spontaneous passion, and she recalled who she was, and to what position her brother had aspired; what position her father had actually held, and within what rigid rules and proud decorousness she had been upbrought: no man allowed within nearer limits than the edges of her fan flung outward. Her pure blood, her illustrious descent, the galaxy of kings and princes and emperors among her ancestors had been constantly brought before her attention. And this man, before whom she crouched, was base-born! A rebel, an adventurer, a mercenary soldier—son of an Italian Columbine.

It had been galling outrage to all her principles and pride to know herself offered to him as a wife; and now she was in his power, subject to his incredible cruelty. Never had she thought of such a woman as herself, so bred, so placed, so protected, being, by any possibility, subject to such an outrage. She had never heard such tales of him, and she was sure that some terrific change had taken place in him since last she met or heard him spoken of; or had he always been a monster, and it been masked from her, poor fool that she was?

She raised her head and laughed, in breaking control; and, as she laughed, stared at him. He had come nearer, and was looking at her harshly.

"You are too tired," he said, briefly. "You are overwrought; will you not eat and drink and rest with me and take up these troubles in the morning?"

He put out his hand to touch her, but in a second she was away, and pressed hard and frantically against the smooth, white wall.

"So hateful to you, eh?" he muttered, and looked her up and down. "Did you know I was pursuing you?" he added. "For weeks now, from place to place—always on your track; did you know that?"

"No," she answered, "and why should it have been?"

"Because only through you can I balance my account with your brother."

"What has he done?" cried Maria Luisa; and Christian, gulping his wine, said:

"Ask him to tell you to-morrow."

He came slowly to the sophy from which she had just fled, and sat down with heavy sullenness, and stared on the floor almost as if he had forgotten her presence. Maria Luisa left the wall, and came a little nearer to him, and looked at him; and her fright faltered and vanished in her heart, giving place to another passion—that of pity. She saw that this man, who had appeared to her so dreadful, so atrocious, was in anguish. In his pomp and pride, beneath the outward show of bedizened bravery, the soul of the man was naked and in pain. She thought that his case was as pitiful as hers, and she murmured, in a musing tone:

"Why are we both so unfortunate?"

Christian turned at that, and looked up at her. Maria Luisa crossed herself.

"Monseigneur," she whispered, "God have mercy upon you!"

"Would that be your prayer for me?" he asked; and, catching hold of her, drew her down on to the sophy beside him, she unresisting. "To-morrow I think you will not hold me so gently in your regard."

An extraordinary stillness filled the room. It seemed to Maria Luisa as if the world had stopped about them. Through an opening in the heavy, pale curtains, she could see the vivid comet in a rift of the sombre snow-clouds, and all earthly things seemed to dwindle to insignificance.

"Monseigneur," she said, "if I were to tell you one thing, would you let me go? I, too, have lost in love; I, too, have found that love can sting. That is your case, I think!" she added, simply, peering into his inscrutable face. "I believe that the Princess Eleanora must be dead."

"I hope," whispered Christian, "that she is dead."

THIRTY-NINE

MARIA LUISA did not answer that; at last she knew what he meant, what it had all meant, from the day he had ridden out of Frankfurt, a declared rebel; through all her guarded pieties, her remote decorums, she had learnt what is the one thing worse than death for a woman; and he wished that Eleanora was dead, he who had paid such a high price for her . . . and Leopold had coveted her . . . and taken her, behind this man's back; foul, foul dishonour, thought Maria Luisa, giddy with the shock of this fell discovery, and no marvel that they were in the mire; what manner of pestilent sweet creature was this Eleanora that such a downfall had been possible?

The long silence explained them to each other and explained what was between them; now that she had realized his tragedy Maria Luisa thought less of her own; even in her own eyes she became unimportant; he rose, left her on the yellow sophy and went to the supper table.

She stared at him drinking; he seemed to repress a shudder every time the wine touched his lips; she noted, with a racked tenderness the lavish prodigality of his appointments, how the ransacked room had been transformed into a princely apartment by his valets . . . often had she heard of his stupendous extravagance, and now she beheld it; amid the ruin of war, he blazed with the pomps of peace scattering and bedecking this meagre chamber; and on every possible place, on crystal, on silver, on gold, on the curtains, on the bed draperies, the arms of Kurland and the circle of letters that spelt the too famous name, C. R. A. C. K.; yet all this munificent bravery must be bottomless . . . even she knew that a landless man could not long live at such a pitch; he had no pensions, no revenues, no apanages; this

was an odd concern for her, at this moment, to make her concern . . . his riches, his resources.

"You are moody," he said, "sullen, perhaps; will these change your humour?"

He put his hand into his inner pocket, and brought out a lustre of green tangled fire that caught up the brilliancy of the flames on the hearth.

"Nothing so costly," added Christian, "but with cost can be bought—do those induce your smiles?"

He tossed two gems to her that fell in the lap of her stained habit; she saw two diamonds, one of exultant beauty, and recoiled.

"They were hers," she stammered.

"And shall be yours—a fair price even for Cæsar's sister, eh?"

"All women cannot be bought"; she shook the stones to the floor.

"No?" Christian picked up the diamonds and held them dangling before the violent, leaping fire. "Yet there is enough here to buy a deal of most commodities. That larger stone was purchased with a regiment of men, it is named Mitau and in it I can see a city—such as no one built yet, I think . . . vain life and fruitless love made solid here, Madame, made durable—these flashes illuminate no vulgar aspirings and no common torment—"

"Kurland—to you?" she asked, with all her pity on her lips.

"Olympus, say!" He laughed cruelly at himself. "I might as well have desired that—and laboured to found an Empire in sunset vapours. Kurland, always Kurland, Madame. I served France for Kurland, but France had no power to wrest it to my grasp, then your father, then the Queen of Hungary, always for Kurland—always deluding deceits."

"Leopold would have given it to you," faltered Maria Luisa, "had you not pulled him down; now that is lost."

"Have you not guessed that I could take nothing from him?" he frowned. "Come, wear the jewels; somehow we'll

strike the bargain equal yet—perhaps he took them from her bosom—I'll set them in yours."

Maria Luisa did not stir; she was hardly conscious of any insult or outrage in what he said; she could not hold to rules of speech or conduct now, isolated in this tragedy amid a torn and tumbling world; what, in any turn of events, was before her; negation, death, affront; she was nothing in this turmoil of disaster.

If he could have loved her as he had loved Eleanora . . . she would have given him no stinted measure of passion, of loyalty, of adoration; ironic that she should dare to think this now that she never dared to think before; she was enervated, almost drowsy with the warmth of the room and repose after exposure and toil.

And still he held the diamonds, the chain slipping between his fingers, and stared into the flashing facets . . . the diamond named Mitau with Kurland in its heart; looking at him, Maria Luisa knew, by a delicate intuition that even in his agony he loved all that glittered, that was of great luxury, that was resplendent and of the extreme of pomp.

Surely he had forgotten her in that deep reverie evoked by the cold fires of Mitau the diamond, now she might creep away; she rose awkwardly, as if her limbs were cramped, and reached out a shaking hand for her tumbled fallen coat; but on this movement Christian turned at once.

"Not so easily. I must command your company."

"What," she replied, "can prevent me from leaving you?"

"Madame, a locked door."

Maria Luisa stood with her hand on the back of the yellow sofa.

"You would not be so ignoble as to detain me, Monseigneur?"

Christian smiled and said:

"Unfasten my gorget—I would not call a lackey in."

His intention was then, cold and deliberate insult; for that purpose she had been brought here; the realization of this braced her, dispelling alike her fears and her compassions.

"Does it gratify you," she asked, bitterly, "to make me your servant? We have come to a base level."

"Madame, since I was wounded in the shoulder at Gobitz armour has galled me, yet I learnt the habit of wearing it while in the French service, and maintain it, as a matter of discipline—to-night I had forgotten it, but now feel the weight—will you unlace me?"

"If I did not think your intention was to humiliate me—"

"You recall, perhaps, how first we met? A concert at the Hofburg when I first came into your father's service, and you were not sure if you should notice me—you looked away when I was presented to you and would not give me your hand—"

"Do you revenge that now?"

"Madame, I have better weapons than meagre discourtesies to my hand. Even the Cæsar's sister may relieve a tired man of his armour."

"Without humiliation," she replied, and crossed the room to him, and, reaching up a little, unlaced gorget and cuirass, which was black and gold inlaid and lined with leopard skin; she saw the flames on the hearth reflected in the burnish of this dark steel and curiously lingered with the weight of the heavy pieces in her hands; a detestation for Eleanora overwhelmed all other passions in her throbbing heart; these light false women whom men must love. . . .

Christian gave a movement of relief; the diamonds still swung in his idle fingers.

"Will you not take supper with me now?" he asked. "I have not entertained a woman of quality since I was in Paris, and have forgot the devices that please—but delicate gentlewomen are not so nice, I find, as I did consider them, therefore perhaps you can endure my rusty manners."

"Monseigneur," replied Maria Luisa, knowing this bitter reference was to Eleanora, "you may stint these mocks, I know the main blow you have had and the monstrous chance that sets me here—will you not have done and suffer me to leave?"

"No."

"Is not Count Hensdorff here—my father's friend?"

"Count Hensdorff would not stand between me and any purpose of mine."

To give herself some employment for her trembling hands she set the armour on the bed step, carefully, piece by piece, and there she saw papers thrown down and the words on one caught her frantic glance.

Missal	1
Crucifix	1
Altar cloths	2
Boxes of Silver for the Wafers	2

A list of chapel furniture; she remembered that he had returned to the Faith.

"A priest," she asked, "have you not a priest in your near attendance?"

"You and I," replied Christian, "will contrive without a priest."

Maria Luisa sat down on the bed step, which was spread with a Persian cloth, and stared down at the papers without now taking in their meaning; she was enclosed, nothing of which she could think would serve her now . . . to-morrow she could die, but how to deal with to-night. The letters paraded before her staring eyes.

Inventory of the Artillery of the Army of H. H. Monseigneur Prince Christian, Duke of Kurland, signed by M. Clouet, Lieutenant and Commissioner of the Artillery Park in the above Army—

Yes, she would read these avid lines while she fought for her courage; there must be something one could do . . . always remembering that she could die to-morrow . . . he had his back to her now and was drinking slowly, staring down into the glass between each draught as if he saw more than the wine there; like trim soldiers those neat letters paraded. . . .

Pieces of 33

<i>L'Inférnal</i>	weight, 5920	armes, Kurland,	length 9h. 60 p.
<i>L'Inexorable</i> ..	" 5860	" Kurland	" id.
<i>César</i>	" 5880	" Kurland	" id.

Maria Luisa could read no more . . . these names were of too ill an omen; it were better not to think, better, by some means, to bring this black suspense to an issue; her silence only fed his cruelty.

As she contrived to rise he had turned to look at her over his shoulder.

"Do you study the list of my artillery, Madame? Those are faithful guns which have forced many a city to capitulate—"

"Monseigneur, you have had sufficient triumphs to enable you to be generous," she stammered; "think how you have reduced my brother—taking from him an Empire."

"And yet the balance does not swing level. He took from me more than an Empire."

"You rate her too high!" cried Maria Luisa, in a sudden passion of scorn that caused him to look at her with more interest than he had yet displayed.

"What do you understand of any of it?" he asked. "No doubt neither she nor any other woman is worth much delay in this short progress we have across the world, yet my loss is beyond your computation."

"Perhaps not, Monseigneur. I am convent bred and not so long accustomed to human affairs, yet I am not so foolish that you can take me utterly for a trifle."

"This is bold," he said, negligently.

Maria Luisa came nearer to him where he leant on the mantelpiece above the radiance of the lusty flames; round his wrist he had hung the diamonds, a pale sparkle of green and azure in the long ruffles.

"May I not ape some boldness now?" she asked haughtily, "since it seems I am beyond all but pride—"

"You have a royal spirit," remarked Christian. "Had

you been in your brother's place you might have held your father's throne—"

"Had I been in your wife's place, I had set you on a throne," she said in the same tone. "We have each missed something, Monseigneur."

"I, more than I can measure," he replied, curious of her air of passion—"and you?"

"Everything," she smiled arrogantly, "and since the first . . . bankrupt as I am, I cannot entertain you, Monseigneur, now . . . once, had you asked it, I might most richly have endowed you—"

"You can still give me what I most value above riches, revenge," he smiled, staring her down. "Set me again on the Cæsar's level, eh?—one woman for another—and perhaps my account a little overpaid . . . she has an Emperor for her lover, while his sister will have only General Crack."

"A lover?" she repeated.

"I put it delicately . . . plainer since you question the terms, you shall be my bedfellow to-night—I think she was no more than that to him, and these jewels, a foul wage paid in his presence for a vile purpose, shall go back with you to him—your price now, too."

Maria Luisa did not blench; fear was now as far from her as hope.

"You frustrate yourself," she said. "I know you as you do not know me. You cannot do it—and commend yourself to-morrow."

"How many men would stay their hand?" he demanded insolently. "And you please me well enough for a brief distraction even though you were not the Cæsar's sister."

"And you please me well enough for me to stay to-night, ay, and many nights if—it would help you," she answered. "You talk down your own heart; see, Monseigneur, I, too, speak plainly, what is there now to hinder me?"

Christian, regarding her with intense scrutiny under frowning brows, asked:

"You would stay willingly?"

"If I could help you . . . but I have more than my body

to give . . . perhaps she had, Monseigneur, we do not know."

Christian turned his head away abruptly.

"If you ever come to issues with her, remember that . . . maybe there was more in it than gross wantonness . . . as for me, if you loved me, or even desired me,"—she sighed, struggling with a fainting breath—"I would not endeavour to be gone."

"Why?"

"What do I matter? I am so unimportant in a very world of ruin, and I could die so easily. I would stay, to be your mistress, before all the camp if it would avail you any comfort, but I am nothing to you but an instrument of vengeance, you would dishonour me coldly merely to degrade my brother—"

"You read me well," he said, bitterly and sternly.

"And to-morrow you would sicken at yourself and think Leopold the better man."

Christian regarded her keenly as she spoke; he seemed absorbed in what she said.

"You have a noble mind to speak thus," he pondered.

"My mind is nothing, my heart speaks. I have always loved you."

With an utterly careless triumph she watched him and saw a slow colour come into his dark face, and his arrogant eyes falter at last before hers and turn aside.

"From the day in the Hofburg," she added, "when you thought I slighted you. But you . . . never mind now . . . we cannot help each other . . . but never think, Monseigneur, that I was afraid . . . could my embraces have given you five minutes' oblivion, I need not have been forced to bestow them."

Christian did not answer; he untwisted the diamonds from his wrist and laid them on the mantelshelf; Maria Luisa picked up her coat and put it on; between the massive folds of the stiff curtains she could see the smoky glare of the comet, low in the formidable sky.

"Monseigneur, will you not allow me to go?"

Christian appeared to rouse himself from deep brooding.

"I must see if there is accommodation in Altsdorf . . . perhaps Hensdorff will know," he smiled, but not with his usual ease. "You have the honours of this engagement, Madame, where I have played the part of a general who serves without distinction and retires without reward."

Slowly he crossed the room and unlocked the door.

"Let it end on a jest," said Maria Luisa. "I will forget your intention if you will forget my confession—"

She came to the door wearily for all her gallant carriage.

"You took a sure way to free yourself," he replied, "with your pretty invention, eh?"

"You'll never hear a clearer truth than you have heard to-night," she said. "And you know it. And you do not care. And I must endure that. Be satisfied that my pride aches as rawly as even yours can."

Hensdorff was in the little outer room, dozing in a low chair before a stove with a rug over his knees; he had been ailing lately and tormented by rheumatism, and was fatigued by much travelling and the hideous winter; his head nodded on his breast, his pendulous, yellowish nose and sagging cheeks were heavily outlined in the shadow of the lamp set on the bracket above his head.

"So," thought Maria Luisa, "he would have drowsed here—while I—"

"My dear Count," said Christian, "we have on our hands the Elector's sister—since she rejects my entertainment—where can we house her?"

"Eh, eh?" Hensdorff, startled, got to his feet; how old he seemed, thought Maria Luisa, how old, and shrunk and feeble. "The Archduchess! I did not know whom you had within. Eh, eh, the Archduchess!"

He stared from one to another.

"There should be a convent here," said Christian. "I saw one on the hill. See she is taken there, Hensdorff—Father Hesdin should be in the house, he will arrange it—Madame, I could do no better for you if you were my own sister, for here we are in the very seat of war—"

Still Hensdorff stared from one to another, and Christian returned to his room, closing the door, as if he had already forgotten both of them.

"You, shut in his chamber?" stammered the old man. "I did not know—"

"I am pleased you did not know," she replied with infinite fatigue. "And yet there is no matter in that."

"He has not affronted you?"

"Only by sending me away," she said, with the most wistful irony. "Will you not go in to him? There is a man in torment—"

"Ah, you noticed that?" he asked anxiously, and she saw immediately that his concern was not for her, but only for Christian. "One can do so little. If he would sleep . . . I have been with him when he has lain on an inn table fully armed—I sitting beside him to hold his hand . . . and then he has slept a little. . . ."

"Alas!" she whispered. "Alas!"

"Ay, ay," said Hensdorff, grimly, "it is an ill thing to see a fine body tortured by a broken heart that cannot kill it—"

Maria Luisa wept without covering her face; the tears dripped down her cheeks.

"Come," sighed Hensdorff, stretching for his cloak, "I must see you to that convent—I hoped he had some woman with him to-night who would have brought him some comfort—"

"Could I have done so, I would have stayed."

The old man heard this without surprise; values had lately been altered for him also.

"And I would have let you," he answered, simply. "Come. God, but it is cold!"

He had opened the door onto the lights of Altsdorf and the dingy glare of the distant comet which pierced the menacing clouds; the snow had ceased, but the cold was like an actual presence abroad; Maria Luisa, wincing and shuddering before this cold, turned her tearful gaze from

the comet's supernatural glow to the dim human illumination of the room behind.

"Go back to him."

"Yes, yes, my sledge is outside—they will take you to the convent—there are other women there—take my pelisse," he put it around her. "I will wait on you later—it is better I should return to him, eh?"

He took her to the sledge, gave his instructions to the driver, all hurriedly, nor did she speak again, huddled deeply into the furs and rugs as if vanquished by the freezing air.

Count Hensdorff hastened back to Christian's bedchamber and entered without ceremony; the young man had returned to the fire on which he was carefully, and without interest, piling logs.

"A ghastly night," he remarked. "There seems no heat in fire or wine to-night—to-night I could neither warm my hands nor make myself drunk—that's fearful, eh, Hensdorff—a cold sobriety on this occasion of all occasions."

The old man looked at him anxiously.

"Still in that mood?" he questioned.

"Thwarted again. I could not do it, though it had long been my intention, but that goes with other things. . . . I am too nice, Hensdorff. I should have had to have been very drunk to have done it—faugh! Maybe I missed something in that gentlewoman," he added restlessly, "but one may not command one's inclination."

"I think she would have been faithful," remarked Hensdorff. "It seems a long time since I came to Ottenheim to offer her hand—is that only ten o'clock?"

"I'll have the music back," said Christian, hurriedly. "Never shall I sleep—don't leave me—there are those inventories to check—where did I put them? We've lost some guns since then, I think, and yet I cannot do that now—"

"There's still Leopold," Hensdorff reminded him. "No need to show pity there—"

"Pity? I have none." He swept the diamonds into his hand. "See, I seemed to hold it all, like that, Mitau, Kur-

land, a throne, wife, children, a family and universal honour—ah, in the thunder of my youth all seemed so easily possible, I did not find it difficult to dominate my fortunes—presumptuous, eh? Hardly now can I believe how I have been frustrated.”

“Not frustrated,” muttered the old man.

“From the first. A base-born, landless man, nameless too; General Crack, eh? The butt and jest of every fool who was not ashamed to name his mother. And yet, by God, I could have done it—”

“You’ll do it yet—”

“No—that was a thrust brought all done—see my aspirings, Hensdorff, here—” he held out his hand with the diamonds on the palm. “A life’s visions—all—all,” he added fiercely, then turned and cast the gems onto the flames; “gone now—and some lackey will rake them from the ashes and buy with them a world of gross delights!”

FORTY

NEVER had Leopold longed for any hour in his life as he longed for the hour of his death. Served by both ministers and generals who were reluctant and incompetent, and neither admired nor believed in him, he had tasted nothing but the bitterness of defeat since the day when Christian had risen in rebellion against him; and, though the Allies held to the armistice that Christian had wrung from them, his rival for the Imperial Throne did not allow this opportunity of securing his own pretensions to slip. The King of Prussia had returned to the cause of the Queen of Hungary, and many of the German princes had followed him.

Leopold of Bavaria, an Emperor without an Empire, a landless and a harried man, scarcely knew the extent of his own misfortune, or the scope of his losses on the vast field on which he fought with his scattered and dejected forces, nor could he tell which town held for him, nor which had been seized by the enemy. He hardly knew who was friend and who was foe—only that Christian had everywhere defeated him, and that the Hungarians and those Austrians who were in allegiance to the Queen of Hungary were falling upon him at every available point. He had no government, and practically no army; even those two generals disgraced by Christian—Fürth and Olivenza—whom Leopold had released from their confinement, had proved themselves utterly useless to support his broken cause; the Duke of Olivenza had been trampled to death by his own flying soldiery in a sharp retreat; and Fürth had retired frightened to his own estate, there striving to retain some of his spoils by entering into a correspondence with the Queen of Hungary.

Looking abroad, Leopold could see nothing but ruin,

and scarcely knew which was his own ruin and which that of the enemy. Always war had been to him monstrous—even incredible; now, in the midst of this most ghastly and confused war, or, rather, several wars woven into one, he felt himself the principal actor in some hellish vision, where a horrid pageantry of death is performed by fiends; the hideous weather was to him another enemy in the field. To the waste and ruin wrought by man was added the waste and ruin wrought by nature; and always, when the clouds parted and there was a rift in the dun vapours of smoke and fog, the sullen eye of the comet showed lurid in the pale winter blue.

Perpetually gathering together remnants of his straggling, starving and defeated army, Leopold fled from city to city, from town to town, from fort to fort; while always behind him the Lion of Kurland brought down the Lion of Hapsburg from bastion and tower.

Father St. Nikola, who, with serene courage, remained faithful to his master, and attended him in the most miserable of his wanderings, offered some consolation by observing that the cause of Christian was by no means as brilliant and triumphant as it seemed.

"Europe," declared the Jesuit, "would certainly not long tolerate such an upstart—a base-born, mercenary soldier."

And it was well known that the King of Prussia had seized this opportunity, in concert with Poland and Russia, to seize Kurland, where Christian had believed himself about to be firmly established, and where he took the title of Sovereign Duke.

"He may ravage the Empire," remarked the priest, "but the Empire will fall on him and crush him in the ruins."

"And me also, I think!" said Leopold.

"You, Sire, are always the Emperor. You have the place of power, true blood, unblemished descent: and these things he can never get. Who would set *him* up in Vienna, or crown *him* at Frankfurt? Even though his wanton and insatiable ambition would be satisfied with no less!"

Leopold did not answer this. He knew that Christian

had not flung the country into the turmoils of this most dreadful war for any ambition—not even for the ambition of seizing the Imperial Diadem. His large, blue eyes stared helplessly at the Jesuit.

“How long can this go on?” he asked. “How long before I am finally defeated and slain? Every engagement I seek out death; and still it flies before me.”

“Doubtless,” said the priest, “God is protecting Your Majesty, and it may be Prince Christian, and not yourself, who is finally defeated. Not for ever will he be able to pay his soldiery, particularly now the revenues of Pomerania fail; not for ever will he be able to quiet his men with booty from lands so ravaged that there is no more booty; not for ever can he feed his troops through this most severe winter.”

“Nor I either,” replied Leopold, wildly and sullenly. “I tell you, Father, I wish for nothing but the end . . . to get some peace at length in the grave!”

The Jesuit had long since drawn from him, in secret confession, the story of that night at Ottenheim; but never, either to the Emperor or to any one else, did he make any reference to this event; but now he said, indifferently and almost casually:

“Sire, a dead man cannot marry the Princess Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau, nor appeal for the annulment of her marriage. I think this lady,” he added, carefully, “has the right to ask that you should live.”

Leopold did not reply, but turned away his face. Eleanora had gone—was lost to him. Love and lust alike were

quenched in fear and dread and humiliation; he only remembered her as a man for many years in a deep dungeon where some lonely star he had chanced to see as a perpetual blackness. So incredibly remote, overlaid by subsequent darkness . . .

Yet he had, sometimes with disgust . . . no possible memory of what he had paid.

He never answered, on every possible occasion, by every secret missive to Ottenheim. She did not know if she got those letters

or not, nor even if she lived; for his last messenger, sent some weeks ago, had not returned.

Nor did he ever have news from Anhalt-Dessau. That careful, prudent, timid man had sided neither with his son-in-law nor with his Emperor, but preserved, for a while, guarded neutrality in his little province, shielding his own interests with a cautious hand. He was furious alike with the rebellion of Christian and with the weakness of the Emperor, and after a few weeks decided not to join his fortunes with either one or the other, but made his pact, as did so many of his fellows, with the Queen of Hungary and her husband, who had now become rapidly the ascendant party in the Empire. He, too, said in his narrow heart: "Leopold is a weakling, and Christian is base-born. Neither of them will be able to hold their ground." Nor could he forgive his son-in-law for the part he had played, so unexpected and so terrible . . . to Anhalt-Dessau and so many other men, so inexplicable.

Leopold, then, did not know if Eleanora was alive or dead, and he played with that thought, forgetting the presence of the Jesuit, and wondering if he would prefer that she should be living and waiting for him, or dead and at peace in the chapel at Ottenheim. He could not believe that, even if she bloomed as she had bloomed when he last saw her, there was any pleasure for either of them in the years to come.

His sister, the Archduchess Maria Luisa, had lately been returned to him by a troop of Uhlans bearing the white flag, and delivered over to his care from General Knittelfeldt. He had learnt, with the deepest of humiliation, of her capture by Christian; but when he had questioned her as to the details of this she had lied, and said that she had only seen, slightly and at a distance, the Commander-in-Chief of the rebels—the Duke of Kurland she had perversely called him.

Leopold had not believed her story. She was so cold and distant to him, and he fearfully suspected that she had seen Christian, and learnt the secret of the war. She had withdrawn silently into a convent, where she was likely to be

respected by all the combatants; but Leopold did not feel at ease with regard to his sister. When he had escorted her to her retreat, and paused at the portal to see her limping away across the frozen garth, she had not looked back. He felt himself locked out of the heart of this, his only kinswoman; felt that she was hostile towards him, and even wished him ill.

Thinking of these two women, both such images of torment, these two lost women, Leopold began to speak, raging, as weak men will, against destiny.

"Never," he declared, "did I desire to compete for the Empire. I was thrust into this against my desire. I was given an impossible work to do, an impossible place to hold. The times are mean, corrupt and foul. Father, no man could succeed in such a task as was laid on me."

"But one may," the priest reminded him, "fail with dignity; and for me," he added, shrewdly, "I do not view Your Majesty's affairs with so gloomy an eye. Prince Christian has been like a thunderbolt upon the land, and like a thunderbolt he will flare and smoke himself out to coldness and blackness. He has no just cause, no just title. I have read much history, and never read of a mercenary who long survived." The Jesuit, who had set his own unfluctuating standards on no earthly battlements, spoke with unblemished severity.

"If the spring would come!" muttered Leopold. "This weather, this endless cold, this incessant fog and that accursed comet, night after night!"

"Maybe it does not flare for us," smiled the Jesuit, "and I believe it is now fading away, so the astrologers say. After this month we shall not see it. If Your Majesty will look, you will see that every night it is dimmer in the sky, and lower on the horizon."

"Then," replied Leopold, fretfully, biting his full under lip, "I do indeed think it typifies my fortune, for I am dimmer and lower every night also, Father. I have no gift of government, nor any gifts at all; and the burden put upon me I can no longer shoulder."

The Jesuit glanced at him with a certain wise compassion.

Leopold looked ill, disarrayed; utterly overborne by anxiety, fatigue and distress; he stooped and coughed frequently.

"Where are we now?" he asked, dully. He indeed scarcely knew, so often did he move from one little, unimportant town to another, as his retreating generals directed; and when the Jesuit gave him the name of the insignificant hamlet where he was now in refuge, it meant nothing to him.

"So many little towns and villages, and cities and forts ruined and piled with dead and dying, neglected and abandoned, red and black from fire; and I still live," he mused. "And I should have been the first to die."

That night a further retreat was ordered before the advancing forces of Christian of Kurland. He, like Leopold, had come to a climax in his fortunes; the Jesuit was right when he had said that the mercenary could not long sustain this expensive and tremendous war. He had been hardly hit by the seizure of Pomerania and his revenues by the Hungarians; nor was he able to get through supplies from his loyal supporters on the Baltic, where he held such profuse and considerable estates.

His men, though glutted with such frequent victory, and dragging with them more booty than they could with ease carry, were beginning to murmur at the continued hardships of the long winter campaign. They wished for rest and repose, wished to enjoy the fruits of their triumphs. They yelled for General Crack when he led them into battle, but not so loudly when he paused in his bloody progress, and plunder, and even food and forage began to fail, and the icy dark gripped them tight.

Christian, great general and superb administrator as he was, had foreseen this situation from the day he had ridden out of Frankfurt. He listened with ironic disdain to the murmurers, and continued to bear his ragged troops full on the pursuit of Leopold. Nothing mattered to him but that; he had set himself to get these two into his hands—Leopold and his sister. He had captured the woman, but been forced to let her go; but there yet remained the man, on whom to wreak his full revenge; so his generals interpreted his design.

Some of the princes who had been attracted to his rebellion standard by the lustre of his instant and brilliant successes, now began to fall away. They too saw the disapproval of Europe at this mercenary's triumph; they too saw the growing power of the Queen of Hungary and her husband, the stolidity behind that substantial claim.

How could Christian hope to wear the diadem? Or how could he hope to serve any one else who did so? He was discredited with all, an open rebel, playing insolently for his own hand; if he would not sell his sword to some solid Power, he must, in time, be demolished.

Christian saw his forces daily diminish, the princes, under one excuse or another, riding home to their own estates and provinces. He heard how Kurland had been seized, the roads there blocked against him. Supplies failed in Pomerania, and neither the Jews nor the Florentines were eager to lend him further monies. He could not sustain himself and his army save by perpetual pillage, and, as the Jesuit had told Leopold, no land can be pillaged forever; nor even for very long, in the depths of a severe winter, after years of warfare.

But Christian was not disconcerted or dismayed. He even regarded the situation with that amusement with which a clever man beholds the inevitable behaviour of the fools and knaves. All of them scrambling over the ruins of the Empire after their own lusts and greeds and jealousies, like vultures over a carcass!

He alone held his one inviolable purpose, his one insatiable desire; without pause or pity, his army pressed after Leopold.

That night the exhausted Imperialists were defiling through a barren wood, when the alarm was given that the rebels were close upon their heels. One of Leopold's gentlemen, a Bavarian long faithful to his house, seized his horse's bridle and tried to lead the Emperor to safety through the trees, away from the direct line of attack. But the steed was frightened by the first discharge of the enemy's fire, which suddenly rent the frozen air; and plunged, and galloped away

down the forest path, bearing Leopold out from the scattered, bleak trees into the dreary darkness of a swamp, half coated with black ice.

Leopold endeavoured to direct the horse, but it took its own frightened way, and stumbled over some stones, and threw Leopold, who, entangled in his travelling cloak, fell into the swamp, half choked with ice and mud. Here he was overtaken and captured by a squad of the Black Cuirassiers, commanded by Banning, now a Colonel in Christian's army. The Swede had seen the black and silver, the Hapsburg lion and Imperial eagle on the caparison of the stampeding horse, and guessed the rank of the man he helped to drag from the icy swamp, by the uneven lantern light which picked out the gleam of lance and bayonet from the icy dark.

"The Elector of Bavaria!" he cried, in heavy delight, recognizing even here and now that notable face.

Leopold, sick and giddy, endeavoured to dash the mud and ice from his face and clothes; he was shaken and his arm had been wrenched. Banning respectfully demanded his sword, but Leopold unbuckled his weapon, and, with a peevish, passionate gesture, cast it into the marsh. He wished, feverishly, that he had had the courage to plunge it into his bosom, as he had been told by his tutors, once when he was a boy, the old Romans used to do in the moment of defeat; as he had seen them do, in mimicry, on the stage of the theatre in the Hofburg; thereby cheating the enemy of his desired triumph. But Leopold could not do this. He watched dully and shivering while Banning picked the sword out of the mud, and heard the Swede remark drily that it was more honour to deliver one's weapon to a brave soldier than cast it away into filth.

One of the troopers had now recovered Leopold's horse, and taken the pistols from the holsters. Leopold was desired by his captors to remount; Colonel Banning gave him a handkerchief, with which to wipe his face. There was a cold moon overhead, mounting past bitter snow-clouds; and by the light of this, Leopold, with a trembling hand, re-

moved the mud from his person, shaking the flakes of soiled ice from his mantle and tarnished field-marshal's uniform, and put his pale hair back from his brow.

Banning gazed, with almost incredible pleasure, at those familiar features: the large blue eyes, the long, smooth, pale face, the heavy jaw and full under lip; yes, this was really Leopold of Bavaria, whom Christian had crowned in Frankfurt, who called himself the Emperor; and with his capture the climax of the war and of all their fortunes had been reached. The Swede thought that now his master would press on to Vienna, and proclaim himself the Cæsar of the West; and among the Cæsar's most cherished servitors he saw himself—capturer of this rightful Emperor; for rightful he seemed to Colonel Banning, who looked at him and spoke to him, not only with respect but with a certain awe. Defeated and in the last extreme of humiliation Leopold might be; but, to Banning, he was the Hapsburg, the man of unblemished descent; he was all that Christian could never be, even to his own most faithful soldiers.

Leopold, sunk in the apathy of despair, asked them sullenly where they were taking him; and they replied: "To Prince Christian; to the Duke of Kurland."

At these titles, Leopold laughed.

"To General Crack," he sneered.

The Imperialists had now all fled, utterly routed; nor did the rebels follow them. Once Christian had learnt of the capture of Leopold, he had no purpose in any pursuit, nor, indeed, in any further continuance of the war.

He took up his quarters in a small, abandoned country house, and bade Leopold to be brought into his presence. Thus the two men, who had parted before the banquet in Frankfurt, met again.

Leopold, who felt he had nothing further to endure, who had tasted every variety of anguish, who had fallen as low as it was possible to fall, maintained an indifferent demeanour.

Christian had just dismounted from his horse. He wore his fur pelisse, and the resplendent barred uniform with

the Orders of Poland and Russia glittering on his breast; the highest honours of the countries now leagued against him. As always, he had set off his dark, theatrical, flashing good looks with every care and splendour of appointment; not a speck of dust, not a wrinkle defiled the labours of his tailors and valets. His hair was curled as if he had been at Versailles, but not powdered; for the first time Leopold knew how dark he was and hated him deeper for that—Neapolitan gutter born.

General Crack held himself with impassive military stiffness, and did not remove his cockaded hat when Leopold, bareheaded, was brought into his presence. He spoke the mocking words that he had spoken on that day which now seemed so long ago to both of them, in the garden of the Château at Dürsheim.

“Good evening, Cæsar!”

Leopold silently leant against the wall, folding his arms upon his breast; behind him was a cracked mirror, and he observed, with horrid curiosity, how his colour, his fatigue, his dishevelment, was reflected there in the glittering fragments that still stuck in the gilded frame. The house had been wrecked, and smashed ornaments lay among the broken furniture. The only light was that given by a lantern, that had been placed on a ruined table close to Christian, and by the fire, crackling on the desolate hearth, which had been hastily lit.

Christian commanded the soldiers to leave them, remaining alone with his prisoner.

“What would have been my fate,” he asked, quietly, “if I had fallen into your hands?”

Leopold, sick with hate, answered, immediately:

“I should have had you taken out and shot, as the rebel and traitor that you are! And with a gag in your mouth—exactly as you gagged Gabor.”

“Then,” smiled Christian, lightly, “you can expect no less a fate from me.”

“I expect nothing,” remarked Leopold, haughtily. “For me life has long since been at an end.”

"But, Monseigneur," replied Christian, "you would have rather died in some other way than be shot in a ditch, by my orders."

Leopold winced; a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He found himself hoping frantically that he would have the courage to put through his fate with dignity; but he was so chilled and fatigued and despondent, and he supposed it would be now, before he was able even to wash the mud-stains from his person: now, in a filthy ditch, while he was cold and hungry and weary, without the strength to hold his head up. Well, Christian would have his lust of revenge! That night in Ottenheim had been highly paid for. . . . Surely for no other woman would any man have paid such a price. . . . Implacable and inflexible, Christian stared at him. Leopold could see, even in this rough light, that the handsome face was not so unlined and unshadowed as it once had been; but it was as impassive, and changed by the frame of that black hair.

"So," mused Christian, softly, flicking his fur gloves against his thigh, "I can set you up and pull you down as I please, Cæsar; and what pleasure is there in it, after all?"

Leopold replied, through clenched teeth, to keep his full lips steady:

"Yourself also you have set up and will pull down. Do you think, General Crack, that your career can long continue? Even if you murder me to-night, there are other men who will hound you out of the Empire."

Christian repeated one word out of this tremulously defiant sentence.

"Murder!" he said, softly. "Murder! And what have you murdered?"

This was the only reference that he made to Eleanora.

Leopold, leaning against the wall to steady himself, flung out:

"What I did, I was driven to do. I warned you not to press me too far, but you were not warned."

Christian continued to stare at him long and curiously, with dark, blank, impassive eyes, across the coarse red glow

of the lantern light, the coarse red glow of the crackling firelight, that filled, brightly and more brightly, the devastated trivial room.

"I could hang you," he mused, "as they hang the pilferers, or have you tortured, as the peasants torture the stragglers, or burnt, or maimed, or blinded—any of these things I could do—there is no one to stay me, eh?"

"As you are an outlaw and a rebel," panted Leopold, leaning still more heavily against the wall, "it is in your power to do all that you boast of being able to do."

Christian did not speak; he gazed, brooding, across the meagre lights as if he were alone, and, after a horrid pause, Leopold flung out:

"Whatever you inflict on me, and however I endure it, it will make no difference to our several stations, General Crack."

But he shrank and shivered so before the thought of what might be closing in on him that he scarcely could hold himself upright. He had always been most sensitive to physical pain, though his courage was not mean; and his blood was icy at the thought that he might not be able to maintain his dignity, but be reduced to a shrieking, raving coward . . . perhaps, if they tortured him, to scream for mercy . . . was it possible that they would torture him?

Leopold had little hope that Christian would forbear the extreme of torment. The man was lawless, desperate, and well renowned for hard cruelty. Had he not let loose this war, with all its ruin and death and horror, for this one moment? Leopold knew that, and expected no shred of mercy.

Christian looked him up and down with those cold, dark eyes.

"Yes," he said, quietly, "you always will remain a Sovereign Prince of Imperial descent; and I shall always be the bastard of the Duke of Kurland."

He turned down the wick of the oil lamp, which was beginning to smoke and stain the horn sides. As he performed this task, he said, without looking round: "Had you lived"

—and he spoke as if he addressed a dead man—“had you lived, would you, with fortune, have married her?”

“Yes,” replied Leopold, sullenly. “My agents at Rome already work for the annulment of that Lutheran ceremony.”

“That labour is needless,” replied Christian, over his shoulder. “There will be no occasion for such an annulment.”

“Is she, then, alive?” asked Leopold.

“Why should she be dead?” replied Christian.

“Women have died of such things,” said Leopold; and Christian answered:

“Does it matter to you?”

“Scarcely now,” whispered Leopold, bitterly, thinking of his own death so near. “Believe me, scarcely now!” He put his hand to his heart, suddenly so faint and giddy that he could scarcely see the imposing figure that faced him. “I was riding all night,” he murmured. “If I could, before—before anything that I have to face, have a glass of wine, and half an hour to myself, would that be asking too much?”

“You are like your sister,” said Christian, indifferently. “I would have you at no disadvantage—you shall have all the entertainment you desire.”

Leopold straightened himself against the broken mirror.

“No,” he said in a louder tone, “I will, after all, take nothing from you.”

“As you wish,” replied Christian with the same negligence as before, and he continued to gaze without expression at his prisoner, till the frayed nerves of Leopold could endure it no more, and he cried out, almost on a scream:

“Why do you stare at me so? Cannot you make an end of this?”

“Very soon, indeed.” Christian took off his hat, and his darkness, the black hair and brows and eyes, gave him an appearance almost Eastern in the loathing regard of the man who watched him with such painfully concealed fear. “I,” said Christian, without passion, “could have beaten you at anything, work or play, man to man; I took vast pains, Monseigneur, to learn to beat any one at anything,

nor did I find it difficult. Scarcely have I met my peer."

"You do well to boast now," replied Leopold, bitterly, "when I am disarmed before you."

"I speak as a matter of curiosity, not of arrogance," smiled Christian. "Do you think that I am concerned to flourish now? I say I could have bested you, or any other at any task or any game; ay, with any woman either—given fair play, Monseigneur, given fair play. It is no dishonour to lose when one plays with a cheat."

"You prove yourself ignoble by these insults."

"No," answered Christian, quietly, "not insults—merely a comment. What would you, Monseigneur, call one who bought something and paid the price, then, while he was enjoying his purchase, stole, behind the other man's back, what he had paid?"

Leopold did not answer, nor lower his gaze.

"And with such circumstance that he covered the man who laboured for him with ignominy, with ridicule," added Christian; then, in a gust of passion: "Where was your fine breeding there, you vapouring fool? You must leave the window open . . . you must expose her before a blackguard. . . . I had not done it with a slut of the camp . . . but you, so nice, so squeamish, must make her as public as a drunken trull."

Leopold could no longer maintain his composure; he put his hand before his eyes and turned away his head; Christian, noting this, spoke again in a level voice.

"I shall command myself, believe me I can do it, even that, Monseigneur—in this moment command myself. Once I lost my temper and struck a man, only once did I demean myself to that futility."

Leopold, summoning all his forces, made an effort to dominate the moment.

"I should have been better advised," he said, coldly, "than to employ you; that traitor Hensdorff overpersuaded me. I might have known, yet you have played a lunatic part too, for I would have given you Kurland, had you not pulled me down, but now you will get nothing—even," he added,

speaking rapidly, "if your soldiers should make you the Cæsar, how long will it last? Some one will surely murder you as you intend to murder me."

"If De Lisle had permitted, you'd have arrested me, before I left Frankfurt, eh?"

"I would indeed," replied Leopold, violently. "Had I had the power I would have had you shot—even as you shot Ferdinand Gabor. By God, I always hated you."

"Yes," said Christian, staring at him, "yes. And you will hate me deeper yet. I should have been shot, eh? You'd have liked that—to see me shot like a deserter?"

"Ay," answered Leopold, "I should have liked that, General Crack."

"And if," asked Christian, unmoved, "our places were reversed now?"

"We should not be talking here—before now I'd have had you silenced—with earth in your mouth—why don't you so silence me and have done with it?"

"But I," said Christian, "have already reminded you that I can beat you—in everything, Monseigneur; revenge would please you, you would have me dispatched with ignominy, so to settle your account of hate, but that would not satisfy me."

"He intends torment," thought Leopold in horror.

Christian crossed to the door, opened it, and spoke to the soldier outside. Leopold heard what he said, in that soft, level, steady voice. "Prepare a decent chamber for the Elector of Bavaria, and see that there is some refreshment for him. I believe that the baggage wagons are already up, and there should be some fair service." Then he turned slowly back, and picked something up that had lain beyond the lantern in the shadow on the table; and Leopold saw that it was his own sword, which he, a few hours ago, had flung into the morass with rage and despair in his gesture. Christian was glancing at this as he spoke again.

"Come and take up your sword, Monseigneur; a little soiled, perhaps, a little fouled, but still, your sword."

He held out the ornate weapon, and Leopold, reluctant,

frowning, came and took it and buckled it on with clumsy fingers.

"I am indebted to you for so much courtesy," he flung out.

"Be a little further indebted," smiled Christian, "take up your life, your throne, your Empire. I am satisfied that I could win them all—but they are none of them any value to me."

"I do not understand," faltered Leopold, flushing painfully, gripping the restored sword with nervous fingers.

"No—I said I could beat you at any game, eh? There are better ways of dealing with one's enemies than shooting them in a ditch. Monseigneur, begone and take your rest." He stared full at Leopold with eyes at once intent and expressionless.

"You have me utterly defeated," stammered Leopold.

"From the first," replied Christian. "Monseigneur, we have nothing more to say to each other."

An officer had entered, and Leopold, on this stranger's entry, stayed his broken words, his whole being leapt at the realization that he was not to die, yet shrank in disgust at the manner of his escape.

On the threshold he hesitated, but Christian had now turned his back on him and appeared engrossed in some papers he held.

Leopold followed the Uhlan officer from the room.

When he knew himself alone Christian turned and without a change of countenance set his papers on the table, and checked them, one to the other, with a pencil.

When he had finished this, he straightened himself, sighed, and muttered, half aloud:

"Hardly anything left to do now, hardly anything."

FORTY-ONE

THAT night Christian dashed out the brand of his rebellion as violently and indifferently as he had lit it. To his assembled captains he declared ironically that he had served his purpose now, and that they might go home, or continue the war upon their own, as they wished.

"You were all fighting for your own ends," he remarked, "and you have all of you been well paid. I think you are full-fed with plunder and prizes. It is not my intention to take you to Vienna and make you the jackals at my coronation. I have done. Leopold of Bavaria is in the camp, and you may take him again for your Emperor if you will. I know," he added, ironically, "that I but anticipate your own decision, for you would have me either make myself Emperor, or be devoured by you: there is no middle course in such a career as that on which I have embarked. But now I bid you all farewell. There is food and money in the camp, and pay enough for all. You are disbanded from my allegiance, and I recommend to you Leopold of Bavaria."

The princes and officers whom he addressed were smitten into a fury of confusion, but, when this had a little passed, they were inclined to congratulate themselves on the fact that General Crack had removed himself from their presence before they were forced to remove him.

"He is very experienced and wily," they smiled, one to another. "He knew he could not hold his position, and now he has thrown it up"; and they decided, without too much deliberation, to put up Leopold of Bavaria in his place. What were they without some head—some puppet? It was unthinkable to disband these fine armies, who, after all, would more willingly serve the rightful anointed emperor than the adventuring mercenary.

Some, however, argued with Christian, and entreated

him still to lead them, and to crown himself after seizing Vienna, which, they declared, he easily could do. It was folly, they declared hotly, to throw up everything at the moment of supreme triumph. Leopold must be sent to prison, or even by more direct means got out of the way. But even these men agreed that it must be one or the other—Leopold or Christian. Christian had gone too far ever to serve another Emperor again. He must himself hold the Empire or abandon it. "I abandon it," replied Christian to these; "I leave to-night, with those few of my personal soldiers, my own Uhlans and Cuirassiers, who choose to follow me; and I ride to Kurland."

"But this," they cried in unison, "is staring madness! Poland, Russia and Prussia alike sit tight in Kurland!"

"It is my country," replied Christian, "and I go to redeem it from the enemy."

And before that dawn, while they were yet all too amazed, agitated, bewildered and overcome to do much in the way of protest or agreement, Christian had kept his word. He had gathered together his own troops of Uhlans and Cuirassiers, men who had been in his direct service and personal pay during all his fortunes, and he had left the bulk of the army encamped about the forests and the swamps, and ridden away northwards. Before he had left, he had spoken to Hensdorff, going to the bedside of the old man in the middle of the night.

He had told him that his former master, Leopold of Bavaria, was asleep in this very house, exhaustedly asleep.

"When he wakes," added Christian, "I think he will hear himself hailed 'Emperor' again. These men have no one else to whom to turn, and now I have laid down the command, they must have some one to take it up. You will come in well in that affair, my dear Count; you are both adroit and tactful." He remarked, standing there holding back the plain bed curtains of the modest bed, lit only by the candle he himself carried.

"See also to the marriage, my dear Count—the marriage with Princess Eleanora."

Hensdorff, old and smitten, cried out, asking what he meant, but Christian said:

"You will understand without any words of mine. Good-bye, my dear Count; and thank you for your services!"

Count Hensdorff, in terror, asked him where he went, and he replied to him, as he had replied to the others:

"I go to Kurland, my native place."

"You fling away the whole campaign?" cried Hensdorff, bewildered.

"The whole campaign!" repeated Christian. "I fling away the whole war, the whole Empire! The diadem itself, perhaps. Help your Leopold to pick them up!"

Hensdorff did not know what to reply to such words as these. He sat up, old, wizened, shivering, in his bed, gazing up at Christian, who paused for a little with the candle in his hand, holding back the curtains and staring down at him. And the old man thought that Christian's dark beauty, so arrogant, so bedizened, so steady and so inflexible, had in it something that passed humanity. He stared up at the young man as if he stared at something supernatural.

"You are not leaving now?" he muttered. "You will wait till the morning?" and his old voice took on a pleading note. "You will not ride away like this, on this sudden resolution?"

Christian said: "I go at once." Then he added the last words that Hensdorff expected to hear him say. "Give my duty and salutations to the Archduchess when you see her next, and find her, my dear Count, a good husband."

The old man reached for his bedgown.

"You shall not go like this," he protested. "I must come, too, wherever you go—"

"Nay, your loyalty is to the House of Bavaria, and the Elector is in the camp—he will need you—but I, no one."

Christian spoke indifferently and as if his mind was not on the moment; he put out his hand with an easy courtesy to stay the old man who had flung on his bedgown and risen.

"No, my dear Count, consider your age and infirmities—

neither of which could endure such an expedition as I propose."

"Where are you going?" demanded Hensdorff, resolutely.

"To Kurland."

"Good God—and what do you think you will get in Kurland?"

"All I can now get anywhere—a little space."

"A grave," thought Hensdorff, but he did not say the word, only: "How many do you take with you?"

"My own household troops."

The old man bowed his head; he seemed even older without his peruke, the candlelight gleaming through his fine, thin white hair.

"How have you dealt with Leopold?" he asked.

"I commanded myself," replied Christian. "Yes, I did it, Hensdorff. I think I have never done a more difficult thing and I have been always fond of difficult things—"

"But—your revenge?"

"There is no such thing as revenge," said the young man, carelessly, then he laughed, the candle flame fluttering with his breath; he seemed really amused. "Did I not say that I would never live to thirty without an establishment!"

He turned away, but Hensdorff had caught his hand.

"I must come, too. You'll be damned lonely in Kurland and I damned lonely here—I might make you Duke in good earnest—"

"Leaving your Cæsar?"

"Curse Leopold," replied the minister, angrily. "I'm your man and you know it—"

He sat down and began to pull on his clothes.

Christian, glancing at him curiously, remarked:

"How you disliked me once. Do you recall how we met in Ottenheim, you were scarcely civil—it's odd, you know, my dear Count, for I have not changed—"

"I'm coming with you," repeated Hensdorff, obstinately, but Christian, smiling, shook his head and turned away. Hensdorff, half clothed, saw the little candlelight diminish,

heard the steady footfall disappearing, heard the door close, and cried out childishly: "Wait for me—"

He caught up his pistols, his money, and ran to the door—too late; already the cavalcade was leaving the village street; he did not know their destination; never could he overtake them; Hensdorff flung down his money and arms in disgust.

"He is a ruined man!" murmured the minister to himself. "He has flung everything away. He has nothing left." Musing a moment, Hensdorff added: "If I were not so old I'd follow him . . . if he had waited a little I'd have gone with him—"

Christian did not turn immediately to his distant and almost inaccessible goal of Kurland. Instead, he rode towards the river, the Danube, which he reached towards the cold winter dawn, and followed his course towards Ottenheim. He had no more than a thousand men with him, all of whom were volunteers and who had come on the understanding that they were to hold their lives as cheaply as he held his. Everything was to be staked in a desperate attempt to assert his sovereignty in Kurland, now occupied by Russians, Prussians and Polanders.

Christian had not explained his plans to any of them—not even to the little group of officers who rode behind him; nor did they grumble. Most of them had followed him since he and they were boys together in Flemish trenches, and they asked nothing better than to serve him to the end. General Crack was to them the beginning and the end of all.

These men, all cavalry, and tried, experienced, veteran soldiers, well equipped, well fed, and in every way in excellent condition, soon made their way by forced marches through the deserted country, where no one troubled them. The enemy had not fortified the Danube. Châteaux, villas and villages on the sullen, wintry river were alike deserted. There were armies behind them, in Germany, and armies before them, in Hungary and round Vienna; but here, desolation. Christian had expert foragers among his troops,

and these were able, even out of this dreary, neglected waste, to procure sufficient provision, taken with what they had brought with them, for men and horses, each man being his own pack-horse, while they were followed by a small train of artillery and baggage wagons. Not many days after he had left his main army and Leopold, Christian came in sight of the Emperor's Château of Bosenberg, in the woods on the banks of the Danube, which was now entirely neglected, the valets left in charge having fled, with what property they could make away with. The times were too uncertain, and the future looked too dark, for them any longer to care to risk their lives in these solitudes, guarding these unprotected treasures.

Christian, whose patrols had returned to him with this news of the desertion of Leopold's Château, at once took possession of the palace, and quartered his men in the immense rooms, and put up his horses in the huge stables; such as could not find accommodation within the building—and these were not many—were placed under pavilions set up in the forlorn park. There was still a good store of provision here, and a fine cellar of wine laid down by the late Emperor; and the troops, though noticing that this was well out of the route to Kurland, were well pleased with such a luxurious halt. Christian immediately left the final arrangement of the camp to his officers, and mounting, took the road to Ottenheim, remembering, as he did so, that this was the exact road, step by step, that Leopold must have taken before him, from Bosenberg to Ottenheim, on a winter's day.

There was no change in his dark countenance as he rode across the dreary winter landscape, where everything seemed filmed by ice, and to bear an aspect so barren that any promise of a spring seemed a futile delusion.

Grand and imposing, the full stream flowed beneath its rugged banks, and Christian turned his gaze on it long and steadfastly, remembering how he had always loved the Danube—loved the river better than he had loved any man. The grand sweep of water was as peaceful as it had been when he last saw it, before fierce, unnatural feuds had

shamed the altars and defiled the hearths of the Empire. The long-continued scenes of bloodshed had not reached these banks, nor all the foul terrors of battle been reflected in these indifferent waters. Unchanged were these dusky precipices, fringed by trees, now leafless against a grey sky; they were as they had then been when bloomy with gold and emerald against a blue sky. All the ignominy of colossal war had not disturbed the proud swell of the Danube.

With slackened rein, Christian rode ever nearer the edges of the stream, for here the path wound down between the lofty cliffs, and almost touched the wavelets of the river. So dark, gloomy and sombre was the evening, in this last twilight of a bitter day, that Christian found himself recalling an old story which he had forgotten since his boyhood—a tale which made these banks haunted ground; the tale of Otto of Wittelsbach, who had murdered the Emperor and was here slain himself, his dark head being thrown into the river, while, for nine years swept by the wind and washed by the rain, his cursed body lay unburied. For days (so the awful tale ran) the head of the traitor had not sunk or moved down with the current, but had floated there, gnashing its teeth and fixing its glaring eyes, and waving its clotted locks to the horror-stricken spectators; until the Black Friar had appeared, with a gigantic cross in his hand, made of wood which the Imperial eagle had brought from the true Cross of Calvary, and dared to address the hideous, floating, living head, conjuring it to return to the Hell whence it had come. Then, while the voice of Death chanted a ghostly dirge in the storm, the head had whirled round, shaken its massive tresses with menace at the Friar, and sunk in a circlet of blue flames, which (the fearful declared) were still often seen floating above the water, on this very spot.

Christian smiled to himself at such a tale coming to his mind at such a moment. It must be, he thought, because he had done with the world, and, like a child, was free to amuse himself with fancies because he had no further cares.

As he approached his own estate, he noted how negligently it had been kept. He had been too long away, and

the most faithful of stewards will grow laggard in the master's prolonged absence. The exotic trees and flowers were all withered in the parterres and on the terraces. He passed the menagerie, and saw that the cages and stables were closed. Those delicate and expensive beasts were dead, no doubt; and dead those birds also, that he had been so pleased to see fly among the leafy trees.

Every one here would be doubtful about his return; they would all know the cause of the civil strife he had kindled; they all would know of the visit of Leopold to Ottenheim, honour and credit alike blemished, the lewd grins of lackeys would have found matter for relish, yes, they had all grown careless; he marked a plantation of young trees that had been allowed to perish.

"Splendour soon fades, and requires a constant replenishment," he reflected, as he rode up the main avenue unobserved in the twilight; for he had avoided the guarded outer gates, and taken a way up from the river known to few besides himself. He fastened his horse to a tree at the entrance to one of the *allées*, and proceeded on foot. There was noise and light coming from the stables, and the rooms above them where the garrison was housed. These people were comfortable, even merry. He could hear their laughter, their talk, the tramp and neigh of the horses, and smell the savours of cooking. Whatever happened, servants were always easy and fat . . . they would have been paid regularly, servants and soldiers: he had enough money for that at Ottenheim—money for a great deal of time to come . . . yes, while the money lasted they would stay.

He pulled down his hat, and flung his cloak over the lower part of his face. The wind was very bitter, rising suddenly with icy deadliness from the north. The dark, ornate façade of the house stood out with hard clearness from the icy blue of the sky, from which all clouds had been swept with the coming-up of the stars.

Christian looked at the rows of gigantic, heroic figures in grandiose armour and fluttering draperies, that guarded the double stairs and the long, important terrace by the entrance

door; the stone was cheap and friable, he noticed cracks. The stables had a menacing and yet a futile look, as if they snarled and threatened over treasure long since robbed from them, and were frozen into attitudes of impotent rage. Above the house was a flag, which hung limply to the pole, a dark nothingness; but Christian knew the whole design thereof—the arms of Ketlar and Kurland . . . she lived beneath that still, then.

He passed round to the side of the house, and lightly mounted the balcony that ran in front of the room that had been his room, and since, the room of the Princess Eleanora. Exactly thus, precisely so, must Leopold have done that other night. . . . some such night as this, this same winter . . . So he would have climbed, easily, by those heavy ornaments, onto the balcony; and so have walked along, as cautiously as Christian was walking now, outside the window, and peep, as he was peeping, between curtains half drawn.

Christian looked into a lighted room, that had once been his room—the most familiar chamber in his life, for in no other place had he dwelt as long and as magnificently as he dwelt in Ottenheim.

She was there. Odd that he and Leopold should both have thought her dead! For she was there, and unchanged; seated by the hearth, and playing a game of chess—by herself, for she was quite alone, moving the black pieces with the right hand and the white pieces with the left hand, absorbed in this childish occupation. But ever, now and then, looking up into the fire with a vague look, and then patting, delicately and lovingly, a blue satin casket which stood beside her on the floor, and, in the sweet and warm light of the perfumed candles, gleamed with a coronet in seed pearls.

Christian guessed that in that casket were the letters of Leopold; or, if not his letters, at least some memento of her successful lover; and his surmise was correct. Leopold had written many letters to Eleanora, and, though she had answered none, she had most sacredly preserved them all; and that casket was her constant companion in a loneliness which she had peopled with dreams.

The room was well ordered and splendid, as he had left it well ordered and splendid. There were his tapestries, his pictures, his mirrors, his bed with the brocade curtains and heavy cords and tassels. All the instructions that he had given with such love and such arrogance for the reception of Eleanora had been scrupulously carried out; she was gorgeously housed in his Château of Ottenheim.

The fire had burnt clearly to hues of scarlet and orange, and this rich, delicate light was over her figure, as she sat on the floor at her game of chess, making a rosy hue in the smooth loops of her blond hair, and sending rosy shadows on to her white throat and breast. She seemed pure and childish as when he had last seen her. But he could not see her face; only her slight throat and her attitude—the attitude of one beguiling a time of waiting with dreams and idle amusements. She was waiting for Leopold, Christian thought; even though he had twice deserted her, with unconquerable hope she was waiting for Leopold!

The wind blew over Christian as he looked through that division in the curtains; blew even through his furred mantle and chilled his breast. He was looking backward to some bubble blown in youth, bright with many colours, gorgeous with many lustres: *two* bubbles, in one of which floated Kurland, and in the other Eleanora of Anhalt-Dessau; both broken now into the cold air.

He considered coldly, as if he were considering the life of another man, what his future might have been; what he would have done as the ruler of Kurland and the husband of Eleanora. No more fighting; an end of war; he would have proved himself there and been tired of that. The moment would have come for the governor, the administrator. He would have improved his country, put up great, splendid buildings, opened magnificent schools, laid out great tracts of agriculture, planned, governed, ruled, stimulated, inspired. He would have had great and wise men at his court, to teach his people and his children; he would have defied equally the barbarous north and the heathen east; he would have laid out in Kurland an elegant civilization; and people would have

come to place the house of Ketlar high among the princely houses of Europe. All that he would have accomplished. He had the gift, the patience and the courage.

But now he needed his courage for a harder thing: to fling away his last dream as he had flung away all his gathered pomp, an Empire and revenge alike flung away.

The Princess Eleanora rose, and smoothed down her grey satin frock; she sighed and yawned and stretched and looked at the clock. Another day nearly gone; thank God, another day!

Christian stared at her long and deeply, unheeding of the wind that smote him as he watched. Strange that he should have thought her so different from all the others, and been so afraid to take her that night of their wedding; afraid, almost, that she would perish in his embrace, die under his kiss . . . and even Leopold had known better than that . . . he had taken her, and she lived and smiled, like all the others. In his mind only had existed that creature too fine, too pure for mortal desire. Like a little sleek, plump kitten she yawned and stretched; then settled into the silk cushions of the low chair, and drew the blue casket towards her, to enjoy yet again her solitary pleasure: that of perusing the letters of Leopold.

Christian thought: "I wonder what she has done with mine—torn up—cast away."

He left the window and the balcony, and walked lightly across the darkening park. He thought of the old Duchess, safe in her heavy coffin with the many quarterings on the lid, safe in the dark vault of Dürsheim; and he thought of Pons, and wondered where they had buried him—the little pompous, fussy man who had died rather than face a master betrayed. And he wondered whether the soldiers remaining at Ottenheim would take service with Leopold and who would have command of them—he had taken pains with those soldiers; and so found his horse, and rode back to Leopold's Château at Rosenberg.

As he entered the great, cold hall with all the pompous portraits, where Gabor had waited not so long ago, he saw

an unfamiliar figure—that of Herr Lippmann, the astrologer, whom for a great while he had not noticed or thought of; but the astrologer had followed him, having nothing better to do, and nowhere safer to go.

Christian, noting him, asked:

“Do you come with me on this expedition to Kurland, which is not one, Herr Lippmann, for a civilian!”

And the astrologer answered, with a bow:

“I have some odd loyalty to Your Highness, and I know not what it is.”

Christian pointed to the black night beyond the uncurtained window, where the moon was rising with pallid grey-ness, eclipsing the chill stars, and where the comet glared, a dull smear on the black horizon.

“What are your prophecies and portents to-night?” he asked, lightly.

“When the heaven speaks,” smiled Lippmann, “humanity is dumb, Your Highness!”

Christian looked round at all the high-placed and gorgeously framed portraits, dull, official, menacing; with diadems, crowns and coronets, with ermine and purple, with orders and armour, satins, velvets, and gold brocades; long, pale faces, with clear, blank, large blue eyes—the face of Leopold repeated again and again.

Herr Lippmann followed his ironic glance.

“They keep,” he remarked, “all that Your Highness throws away.”

Christian said, drily:

“How differently I dreamed it all.”

“How many men,” smiled the old astrologer, “have remarked that!”

“But few,” responded Christian, “are or ever have been as capable of accomplishing their dreams as I was.”

“There’s time,” said Herr Lippmann.

But Christian answered:

“The time is passed.”

He thought of Eleanora—stretching, yawning, lazy, snug, luxurious—waiting; and he laughed, staring at the portraits with the face of Leopold.

FORTY-TWO

THE spring was so bitter that men did not know the winter was over, when Christian and his little troop rode into Kurland on his audacious and pre-doomed expedition to recover the dukedom of his father.

Those who followed him and knew him were aware that he had not chosen this as anything but a means by which to die, and they did not murmur at any hardship or defeat, though he never opened his heart to them, and gave them frequently their choice to leave him. They were diminished now, these soldiers, by brushes with the enemy, by cold and by disease; not much more than five hundred men followed Christian across the frontiers of Lithuania into his own country, profaned now by a flaunting, alien domination. Christian pushed on, without pause or pity, as he had pushed on without pause or pity in his triumphal progress across the Empire; on, across streams and valleys, mountains and marsh, across Germany, across Poland, through the black firs and by chains of frozen lakes; until he reached the first fortress held by the Russians at Aut: and there he paused, and issued his challenge, sending out his heralds while he remained on a dark and frozen hill close by with his Uhlans and the standard of Ketlar and Kurland.

His messenger claimed surrender, instant and submissive, to Christian Ketlar, Duke of Kurland.

The Russian laughed grossly at this insane insolence, and cried: "General Crack! General Bastardo!" while he in his turn sallied out with his cumbrous, brilliant troops, and demanded the instant surrender of the daring adventurers to the Czar of Muscovy.

Christian and all his men had expected this response; the challenge they had sent had not been hurled at an obscure

Russian, but to Death itself, whom they had already defeated on a hundred fields, but who now after a little must defeat them. . . .

Christian gave the order to charge, "*En avant*"—as he had given it so many times before to the same men; and the Uhlans and Black Cuirassiers responded with shouts and shouts of "General Crack! General Crack!"

"That, if nothing else!" smiled Christian, and bore down headlong on the Russians, who outnumbered his force ten, fifteen to one; who swept him and his Uhlans back beneath his own scanty artillery.

Christian charged again and again, searching for death as if he were searching for a lover; that day he wore no armour. The Russians, amazed by the force and fury of his attack, were repulsed more than once; but reinforcements hurried out of the citadel and louder grew the Russian cries for "Surrender!" as they pressed round General Crack. It was not their order nor their intention to kill such a man as Christian. The Emperor of All the Russias, the King of Prussia, and the present occupying Duke of Kurland had, when apprised of his mad, foredoomed enterprise, sent orders that he should be taken alive . . . all of them hoped to engage the services of so brilliant, so audacious and so famous a mercenary.

But General Crack did not fight as if he meant to be taken alive; he had come there to die, to fling away his life as he had flung away everything else, in high disdain of all of them; to die as he could not live—a Ketlar, on soil the Ketlars had governed for generations and centuries; the last of his House and of his name . . . that at least here and now, that at least.

After two hours of frantic fighting, reckless charge and bloody counter charge, a desperate and confused mêlée, Christian's troops were driven back never to charge again; more than half were slain, and some had surrendered; a few Uhlans with bloody lances gathered round Christian and the flag of Ketlar.

"You have done enough," said Christian to Banning, beck-

oning him to his side; "give it up now, and serve another man. As for me, it is over."

The Swede, looking at him closely, saw that he was wounded; blood-stained was the tattered lace that fell from his cravat over his uniform; his right arm hung limp by his side, and his dark face was ashen. "Let us charge again," he murmured, "and die in the *mêlée*." But the Swede observed that he was reeling in the saddle, and hardly knew what he said. Banning seized the horse's bridle and turned him away.

"Your Highness does not wish to fall into their hands to die!" he cried, hoarsely and abruptly.

But Christian tried to resist, and whispered:

"The flag, the flag!"

This had fallen, the standard bearer having been cut down near them. Banning stooped, and rent it from the pole, flung it across the saddle, and again led Christian's horse away, through the stampeding press of cavalry on whom the Russians were again closing.

But not far; Banning swerved as a shot whistled over his shoulder, and in that instant he saw General Crack fall from the saddle, while the horse, blood-stained, galloped wildly away through the smoke of the guns from the fort.

Banning dismounted; they were a little apart from the general engagement, half hidden behind the rising knoll where Christian had taken his stand that morning, half sheltered by the black pines, which sent their funereal darkness high into the cold spring sky.

"Were you shot? Was Your Highness shot?" asked Banning, kneeling beside the wounded man.

Christian nodded; then murmured:

"At last . . . it was long enough, eh?"

He raised himself on one elbow, and asked, in a difficult whisper, for the flag. "If I wrap it round me," he said, "they will not profane it. That is the best end for it—and me, eh, Banning? A grave, a shroud—a grave in Kurland," he stammered, smiling, "a shroud, the Ketlar flag . . . after all, not so mean."

Banning obeyed. Christian twisted the standard round

his waist. The effort made him cough, and he wiped blood from his lips, his chin and breast.

"Don't let them get me while I'm alive, Banning," he muttered; "don't let them have me till I'm dead! This should have been quicker."

Banning drew his sword and stood on guard. Christian turned over on his side. His own soil; the soil of Kurland. . . . At least that . . . Kurland . . . after all. . . .

His attention was fixed by something he saw at the root of the tree, a small, strong, bright green leaf, thrusting up through all the dead, arid pine needles, all the black, dirty slush of ice and winter: one bright, fresh, vigorous young leaf. He gazed at this with his hand to his heart, while the blood trickled over his fingers and down over the precise uniform that he had always kept so carefully. The Russians would be storming up the knoll any second. Banning prayed that General Crack might die quickly; and Christian said, still staring at the leaf: "Shoot me, if I do not die immediately. I would do it myself if my hand were more steady."

Banning, looking over his shoulder into the fire-stained murk, answered:

"They have not observed us—"

"This should not take so long," murmured Christian, striving to preserve his countenance in face of the pangs that assailed him.

The Swede gazed down at his master through the vapours that had drifted even here, and saw what he had so often seen, the unmistakable impress of death.

"Your Highness may be snatched away at any moment," he said, "and do not fear but that I can keep them at bay—"

Christian set his head against the tree; he made an effort, as if he were before a mirror, to adjust his cravat, his uniform, the stars on his breast; a troop of Russians stormed up the knoll; Banning leapt to his feet and cried, "Halt!" in so commanding a voice and with such a sweep of his bare sword that the enemy paused.

But there had been no need for this defiance; General Crack was dead and staring at the bright green leaf.





Schöenbuchen

Village of
Dürsheim





HERMIT was his Coe

MÖLK

Road to Vienna

Inn on road to Vienna

CHRISTOPHER AUGUSTUS CHRISTOPHER AUGUSTUS

DETAIL MAP of the CHATEAUX on the DANUBE

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